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SEBASTIAN BROCK

BRIDE OF LIGHT



ST. EPHREM ECUMENICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE [SEERI]

BAKER HILL KOTTAYAM. 686001

INDIA

1994



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HYMNS ON MARY FROM THE SYRIAC CHURCHES

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Translated By

SEBASTIAN BROCK

[Oxford]

St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute (SEERI)

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Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches

By
Sebastian Brock
[Oxford]

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CONTENTS

Page

INTRODUCTION 1

SOURCES 15

I. PRAYER SONGS

1. St. Ephrem, Hymns on the Nativity, no. 11 18
2. St. Ephrem, Hymns on the Nativity, no. 16 20
3. St. Ephrem, Hymns on the Nativity, no. 17 24
4. St. Ephrem, Hymns on the Church, no. 36 27
5. St. Ephrem, Hymns on the Church, no. 37 31

6–21. Anonymous, Hymns on the Virgin Mary, nos. 1–16 32
22–24. Soghyatha 1–3 (Hymns on the Virgin Mary, nos. 18–20) 66
25–27. Anonymous, Hymns on the Virgin Mary 86
28–30. Anonymous, Hymns on the Virgin Mary 97
31–39. Simeon the Potter, Hymns 102
40. Anonymous, Lament of the Virgin Mary 108

II. DIALOGUE POEMS

41. The Angel and Mary (Hymns on the Virgin Mary, no. 17) 111
42. Mary and Joseph 118
43. Mary and the Magi (Soghitha 1) 125
44. Mary and the Gardener 132

III. VERSE HOMILIES

45. Anonymous, Homily on the Virgin Mary I 135
46. Anonymous, Homily on the Virgin Mary II 140
47. Anonymous, Homily on Mary and Joseph 146

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY 161

INDEXES

1. Biblical references 163
2. Names 165
3. Subjects 166
4. Titles and types of Christ 167
5. Titles and types of Mary 169
6. First lines 170

INTRODUCTION

It is often forgotten that the Church has a threefold heritage from early Christianity: not just the Latin West and the Greek East, but also the Syriac Orient – the Christian tradition of the Aramaic-speaking populace of the eastern Roman Empire and of the Persian Empire, beyond it to the east. Each of these three traditions has something special to contribute to the Christian tradition as a whole, and perhaps one of the most distinctive features of the early Syriac Christian tradition lies in the poetic character of its spirituality: poetry, not prose, is seen as the best vehicle for the expression of theology. Through poetry insights can be conveyed in a way that would be impossible in prose; poetry thus becomes the ideal medium for meditation on the mysteries of the Incarnation – and that, of course, includes the place of Mary within these mysteries. The aim of this collection of translations is to bring to the modern reader some examples of the riches of this Syriac tradition of poetry, focusing on the theme of the place of Mary in salvation history. In these poems we encounter a freshness and directness which make us look again at the familiar, but sparse, details concerning the mother of Christ in the Gospels. Side by side with passages of great poetic beauty and profound theological insight, we find others where stark reality peers out, for we also encounter Mary in anguish when Joseph at first refuses to accept her explanation of what has happened to her, or having to bear the shame of being reviled and spat upon by her shocked neighbours and relatives, and living in danger of being lynched and torn to pieces by mob violence as a result of her mysterious pregnancy.

The Pattern of Salvation History: Fall and Restoration

The Syriac poets – and above all St. Ephrem, author of the first five poems in this collection – have a theological vision which might be described as holistic: for them everything in both the material and the spiritual world is mysteriously

interconnected: nothing, and nobody, exists in isolation. This of course also applies to Mary, and one of the great merits of St. Ephrem and the other Syriac poets represented here lies in the way they show how complex is Mary's relationship with her Son – she is sister, bride, handmaid and daughter, as well as his mother; and likewise, how intricate is the web of interconnections between Mary and the Old Testament, between Mary and the Church, between Mary and the individual Christian. In order to bring out these interrelationships, use is made of types and symbols – hints and pointers to be found in the Old Testament which direct the eye of faith towards the New Testament, or to the heavenly world. What is obscure in the Old Testament becomes illumined in the New, and thus takes on deeper meaning.

Especially important in the context of salvation history are the opening three chapters of Genesis, with the account of the miraculous creation of Adam – from the dust of the earth – and of Eve – from Adam's side – and their subsequent expulsion from Paradise as a result of their disobedience to God's commandment. The narrative is seen as a description of how humanity's observable state of dislocation – the Fall – had come about. Adam and Eve are in this respect also Everyman and Everywoman; as Ephrem puts it,

> Through the first Adam who left Paradise
> everyone has left it. (Hymns on Unleavened Bread 17:10; cp 1 Cor. 15:22).

The Fall is understood as nothing else than the wrong use of God's gift to humanity of free will.

Ephrem describes how Adam and Eve were created in an intermediary state, neither immortal nor mortal: God's command not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge was intended as a means by which Adam and Eve could exercise their free will, and if they exercised it rightly, they would be rewarded with the fruit of the Tree of Life. In Ephrem's own words:

> Even though God had given Adam and Eve everything else out of Grace, He wished to confer on them, out of Justice, the immortal life which is granted through eating of the Tree of Life. He therefore laid down this commandment. Not that it was a large commandment, commensurate with

> the superlative reward that was in preparation for them; no, He only withheld from them a single tree, just so that they might be subject to a commandment. But He gave them the whole of Paradise, so that they would not feel any compulsion to transgress the law. (Commentary on Genesis II. 17).

The whole purpose of the Incarnation is to make possible the undoing of the effects of the Fall: its aim is to restore humanity to Paradise, but not just to the primordial Paradise of Genesis, but to the eschatological Paradise where access to the Tree of Life – none other than the risen Christ himself – is also granted. In order to bring out the close relationship between Fall and Restoration, the Syriac poets follow the example of St. Paul (1 Cor. 15:45) and make use of the typological contrasts between the First Adam of Genesis, and Christ the Second Adam; to this they add the contrasts between Eve and Mary, described as 'her daughter'. The following is characteristic of the many examples of this use of typology to be found in the texts translated here:

> The daughter [Mary] gave support to her mother [Eve] who had fallen,
> and because she had clothed herself in fig leaves of shame,
> her daughter wove and gave to her a garment of glory.
> In Mary there has come hope for the female sex:
> from the insults they have heard and from the shame they have felt
> she has given them freedom; they are no longer subject to blame.
> (7:9–10).

Images of the Incarnation

In the language of poetry the Incarnation can be described in a variety of different ways. Two images in particular are recurrent in early Syriac tradition and should be singled out for brief mention here. In lines 74–75 of No. 45 Gabriel tells Mary:

> From the weft of your bodily nature
> He will weave himself a garment and put it on.

The idea of Christ's humanity as a garment which he put on from Mary at the Incarnation is very commonly found among

Syriac writers of the fourth and fifth centuries, and in the earliest Syriac translation of the Nicene Creed the phrase 'he put on a body' translates the Greek verb 'he was incarnate'. Many different variations on this Phraseology can be found, such as '(He put on) Adam, the body of Adam, our body, humanity, our nature', etc.

In fact, in early Syriac Christianity we find that the entire course of salvation history is frequently described by means of the every-day metaphor of putting on and taking off garments. Thus, Adam and Eve are described as wearing a 'garment, or robe, of glory' in Paradise, but they are stripped of this at the Fall (in No. 41, verse 18, Mary recalls how her ancestor Eve had been snatched away from 'her former glory' by means of the serpent's deceit). It is interesting to find that this idea of Adam and Eve's original state of being clothed in glory already features in the Syriac Bible, for in the Peshitta translation of Psalm 8:6 we read 'You created humanity a little less than the angels, in honour and glory did you clothe him' (the Hebrew has 'crown him').

In its fallen state, humanity has thus lost its primordial 'robe of glory'. The whole purpose of God is to remedy this situation and to restore this lost robe, at the same time respecting his initial gift to humanity of free will. To effect this restoration, God first allows himself to be clothed in human language, and to be described in human terms in the Old Testament. Finally, after having 'put on words', God the Word outwardly empties himself (cp Phil. 2:7) of his glory at the Incarnation and 'puts on the human body'. As St. Ephrem puts it,

> God's Majesty that had clothed itself in all sorts of similitudes
> saw that humanity did not want to find salvation through this assistance,
> so He sent His Beloved One: instead of the borrowed similitude
> with which God's Majesty had previously clothed itself,
> He clothed Himself with real limbs, as the First-Born,
> and was mingled with humanity:

> He gave what belonged to Him, and took what belonged to us,
> so that this intermingling of His might give life to our dead state.
> (Hymns against Heresies 32:9).

Then, at his Baptism in the river Jordan – the fountain-head of Christian baptism – Christ deposits the 'robe of glory' in the Jordan water so that it may be available for Christians to put on at their baptism. In the words of Jacob of Serugh,

> Christ came to baptism, he went down and placed in the baptismal water
> the robe of glory, to be there for Adam, who had lost it.
> (Ed. Bedjan, III, 593).

Thus the paradisiacal robe of glory is put on by each individual Christian at his or her baptism; at this stage, however, the robe of glory is present with them in pledge, and they need to preserve it in purity if they are to be clothed in it in reality. Indeed, this baptismal robe of glory is none other than the wedding garment of the parable of Matthew 22:12: Christians are invited to Christ's eschatological wedding feast, and at their baptism (which could be described as their invitation to this feast) they are provided by Christ the Bridegroom with this wedding garment which they must preserve clean in readiness for the wedding feast which will take place at the end of time. It is only at the final resurrection and after the judgement that those who have preserved their wedding garment in purity will experience the full reality of the robe of glory with which the righteous are clothed. In Ephrem's words,

> Among the saints none is naked
> for they have put on glory,
> nor is there any clad in fig leaves,
> or standing in shame, for they have found,
> through our Lord, the robe that belongs to Adam and Eve. (Hymns on Paradise 6:9).

The second pictorial image of the Incarnation that frequently features in the early Syriac poets is that of the Divine Word entering Mary through her ear. This is, in fact, a concept which is often found portrayed in visual form in scenes of the

Annunciation in medieval European art, where a ray of light can be seen descending to the Virgin's ear. The rationale behind this is obvious: Mary conceives God the Word because her ear listens to and accepts Gabriel's words. It should be noticed, too, that wherever we encounter references to the Divine Word entering through Mary's ear, we will very frequently also find Mary's ear contrasted with the ear of Eve: because Eve listened to the serpent's suggestion, the serpent was able to pour poison into her ear. Thus in No. 46, lines 161–6, we learn that

> By means of the serpent the Evil One
> poured out his poison in the ear of Eve;
> the Good One brought low His mercy
> and entered through Mary's ear:
> through the gate by which death entered,
> Life also entered, putting death to death.

The image is already used by St Ephrem himself in his Hymns on the Church (49;7):

> Just as from the small womb of Eve's ear
> death entered in and was poured out,
> so too through a new ear, that was Mary's,
> Life entered and was poured out.

Although a superficial reading might lead one to think that the Syriac poets are indulging in a literalism that could verge on the ridiculous, what they are doing is much more sophisticated: by means of visually dramatic images such as this they are pointing the reader to hidden spiritual reality that cannot be described in concrete terms.

The profusion of titles accorded to Christ in early Syriac poetry may sometimes astonish the modern reader, but one needs to remember that the Syriac Fathers (and they were of course not alone in this) were accustomed to reading the biblical text on many different levels, and accordingly were ready to see a multiplicity of different meanings as implicitly present in a single passage or phrase: the more the interior eye of the spirit is illumined by the light of faith, the more meanings it will be able to discover hidden in the words of Scripture. Two passages from St. Ephrem are worth quoting in this connection.

> If there only existed a single sense for the words of Scripture, then the first commentator to come along would discover it, and other hearers would experience neither the labour of searching, nor the joy of finding. ...Each individual understands according to his capacity and interprets as is granted him. (Commentary on the Diatessaron 7:22)

and (at first addressing Christ)

> Who is capable of comprehending the extent of what is to be discovered in a single utterance of Yours? For we leave behind in it far more than we take from it, like thirsty people drinking from a fountain.
>
> The facets of God's word are more numerous than the faces of those who learn from it. God has depicted his word with many beauties, so that each of those who learn from it can examine that aspect of it which he likes. And God has hidden within His word all sorts of treasures, so that each of us can be enriched by it from whatever aspect he meditates on. For God's word is the Tree of Life which proffers to you blessed fruits on all sides; it is like the rock which was struck in the Wilderness (Exodus 17), which became a spiritual drink for everyone on all sides: they ate the food of the Spirit and they drank the draft of the Spirit.
>
> Anyone who encounters Scripture should not suppose that the single one of its riches that he has found is the only one to exist; rather, he should realize that he himself is only capable of discovering that one out of the many riches which exist in it.
>
> Nor, because Scripture has enriched him should the reader impoverish it. Rather, if the reader is incapable of finding more, let him acknowledge Scripture's magnitude. Rejoice, because you have found satisfaction, and do not be grieved that there has been something left behind by you. A thirsty person rejoices because he has drunk; he is not grieved because he proved incapable of drinking the fountain dry. Let the fountain vanquish your thirst; your thirst should not vanquish the fountain! If your thirst comes to an end while the fountain has not been diminished, then you can drink again whenever you are thirsty; whereas if the

> fountain had been drained dry once you had had your fill, your victory over it would have proved to be to your own harm. Give thanks for what you have taken away, and do not complain about the superfluity that is left over. What you have taken off with you is your portion, what has been left behind can still be your inheritance. (Commentary on the Diatessaron 1:18-19.)

The modern reader also needs to remember that the Syriac poets were using the Syriac translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, known as the Peshitta. In this translation there are some small but significant differences from the renderings familiar from current English translations of the Bible. Thus, for example in lines 136 -7 of No.17, translated below, there is an allusion to the donkey's jaw bone which caused water to flow for Samson: this follows the Peshitta translation of Judges 15:19, but does not accord with what is found in the English translations of the Hebrew Bible.

In one case the Syriac poets make use, perhaps indirectly, of an interpretation that is only found in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In several of the poems in this collection Christ is described as 'the Ancient of Days', based on the prophet Daniel's vision (Daniel 7:13). In the Aramaic original, as well as in the Peshitta and the standard later Greek translation of Daniel attributed to Theodotion, the Ancient of Days is quite distinct from the Son of Man in the same verse ("there came like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days"); accordingly one would expect the Ancient of Days to be understood by Christian writers as the Father, rather than Christ. In the earliest Greek translation of Daniel, however, the text of Daniel 7:13 reads "I was watching in a vision of the night and behold, on the clouds of heaven as it were a son of man came, and he was present as the Ancient of Days...", thus identifying the son of man as the Ancient of Days. It is likely that the Syriac poets took over the title from early Greek Christian writers some of whom also use the term Ancient of Days with reference to Christ.

In several of the hymns the poet warns against prying into the mysteries surrounding the Incarnation: these are not matters capable of being investigated by any form of rational analysis and cold intellectual enquiry (as was earlier pointed out

by St. Paul, 1 Corinthians 1:17ff). Instead, these mysteries should be approached with both a sense of wonder and of love. These anonymous poets share with Ephrem an abhorrence for any idea that one can define- that is, set boundaries to (fines in Latin)- anything to do with the Godhead; in other words, one should not try to contain the Uncontainable. The rationale for such an attitude was stated by Ephrem, as follows:

> Whoever is capable of investigating
> becomes the container of what he investigates;
> a knowledge which is capable of containing the Omniscient
> is greater than Him,
> for it has proved capable of measuring the whole of Him.
> A person who investigates the Father and Son
> is thus greater than them!
> Far be it, and something anathema,
> that the Father and Son should be investigated,
> while Dust and Ashes exalts itself! (Hymns on Faith 9:16)

Elsewhere he points to the proper approach:

> Searching is quite unable
> to extend its rech to You:
> when it is fully extended
> trying to attain to You
> then it is cut off and stops short,
> being too short to reach Your mountain.
> But faith gets there,
> and so does love with prayer. (Hymns on Faith 4:11).

The Role of Mary

In the illustrated Syriac Gospel manuscript dated AD 586, known as the Rabbula Gospels, there are two famous pictures, one of the Ascension, the other of Pentecost; in both the central figure is the Virgin Mary. That she was present on both these occasions (Acts 1:9-11 and 2:1-4) was taken as implicit in the words of Acts 1:14, "All these (the disciples) unitedly persevered in prayer, with one soul, together with the women, and with Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers". The prominence which the artist gives to the place of Mary in the life of the nascent Church is significant, for she has many roles, both in relationship to Christ and in relationship to Christians.

Some of the aspects of Mary's role in salvation history have already been touched on, in particular, her role as a counterpart to Eve. It is in this connection that we also find her portrayed in a number of the poems (notably No. 26) as a partner with Gabriel in negotiating the arrangements for the cancellation by God of the huge burden of debt incurred by humanity through the Fall (an idea based on Colossians 2:14).

Also important are the illustrative epithets and titles conferred on Mary, as well as the many Old Testament figures applied to her: here it is significant that the vast majority of these point, not to Mary in isolation, but to her in relationship to her Son, each term being designed to illustrate a different aspect. Thus, for example, we find a variety of terms that reflect the presence of Christ in her womb: she is a Palace for the King, a Tabernacle or Temply wherein the Divinity resides, the Burning Bush, the Chariot of Ezekiel's vision, or a Ship bearing a cargo of Treasure. Alternatively, she may be portrayed as Aaron's staff that sprouted (see Numbers 17:8–9), or the Rock in the Desert which provided water for the Israelites in the Wilderness (Exodus 17:6, cp Numbers 20). Here the emphasis is on the miraculous nature of her birthgiving. It is in this connection that we sometimes find Mary compared to the tree in whose branches the ram that saved Isaac was caught (see Genesis 22:13). Although this ram frequently serves as a type of Christ in early Christian literature, the reference to the tree will seem puzzling; if, however, one turns to Ephrem's Commentary of Genesis the explanation will be found, for there the following tradition is recorded:

> That the ram had not been there before is testified by Isaac's question concerning the lamb (Gen 22:7); and that the tree had not been there before is assured by the wood on Issac's shoulders. The mountain burst forth with the tree, and the tree with the ram, so that, through the ram that was suspended on the tree and became the sacrifice insted of Abraham's son, that day of His (cp John 8:56) might be depicted when He was suspended on the wood like the ram and tasted death on behalf of the whole world. (Commentary on Genesis, XX 3)

Other names given to Mary will point to the benefits her birthgiving has provided for humanity. The Rock in the Wilderness

can also point in a similar direction, in that it provides living (that is, flowing) water for the thirsty: here most Syriac readers would immediately make an association with baptism, since the baptismal water is frequently described in poetry using the imagery of drinking. And elsewhere we find Mary described as the Vine that produces the Cluster of Grapes, or as the Tree of Life, whose fruit humanity can now pick: both these images convey obvious allusions to the Eucharist.

Through her remaining a virgin, despite giving birth, Mary associates herself with all virgins, but at the same time, since milk flows for her child from her breasts she is also portrayed as sharing with all mothers. Not only that, but since she received baptism thanks to Christ's sanctifying presence in her womb, she is sister both to Christ, and to all Christian-and bride too, "along with all chaste souls" (No 1:2). Nor is the social dimension neglected, for in one poem (3:8) she asks, "Has anyone a servant?" If so, "let him release him to come and serve his Lord". Indeed, some of the most moving of the poems in this collection are those which bring out Mary's solidarity with the poor and the oppressed: she herself is described as 'destitute', 'daugther of poor parents', and 'orphaned girl', and she invites the troubled, oppressed and disabled to come and take refuge in her Son (No. 3:7–13).

But perhaps most important is Mary's role as providing the model for all Christians for how cooperation between humanity and God should take place. In order to draw out the implications of this role of Mary as a model for all Christians, Syriac tradition, from St. Ephrem onwards, points to the parallelism between the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Mary at the annunciation (Luke 1:35), with her subsequent conception of God the Word, and the invocation of the Holy Spirit at the Eucharistic Liturgy, with the consequent sanctification of the Holy Offerings, effecting them the Body and Blood of Christ. This link between Mary and the Eucharist is hinted at in a number of ways in the texts in this collection; particularly striking are the prophetic words Ephrem puts in the mouth of Mary as she addresses her child:

> Your Bread, my Child, is even more to be honoured
> than Your body, for unbelievers too
> saw Your body, whereas they fail to see
> Your living Bread.

Those afar off in time rejoice
for their portion has surpassed
that of those who were close. (2:6).

Furthermore, Communion can be seen as providing the Christian with the possibility of a metaphorical birthgiving, analogous to that of Mary and again only made possible through cooperation with the Holy Spirit. This is beautifully illustrated in a prayer of preparation for Communion by the eighth-century Syriac writer Joseph the Visionary:

> May I receive You, not into the stomach which belongs to the body's limbs, but into the womb of my mind, so that You may be conceived there, as in the womb of the Virgin. And may You thus be revealed in me through spiritual works and good deeds that are pleasing to Your will. (*The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, tr. S. P. Brock, Kalamazoo, 1987, p. 360)

The Text Translated: Poetic Forms

Three distinct kinds of poems, are represented in this collection of translations: lyric poetry or prayer songs, dialogue poems, and narrative poems.

The prayer songs are stanzaic poems (*madrashe*), employing a variety of different syllabic metrical structures. Among these, the longer poems with the more simple metres are designated *soghyatha* (singular, *soghitha*), and these may sometimes incorporate an alphabetic acrostic.

The dialogue poems constitute a distinctive category of *soghyatha*, and they exhibit a regular structure, consisting of (a) an introduction, usually short, which provides the setting; (b) the dialogue, where two biblical characters speak in alternating verses (these often contain an alphabetic acrostic); and (c) a brief conclusion and doxology. These dialogues happen to have a long ancestry, for their form can be traced back to the precedence disputes which are to be found in ancient Mesopotamian literature, written in Sumerian and Accadian.

One does not today expect to hear a sermon given in verse; nevertheless, the verse homily (*memra*) is a characteristic

feature of early Syriac literature, and the two great practitioners of this genre were the famous poets Narsai (died c. 500) and Jacob of Serugh (died 521). The three verse homilies translated here (Nos. 45-47) are all in the 'metre of Mar Ephrem', that is to say, couplets of 7+7 syllables. Very frequently verse homilies in this metre came to be attributed erroneously to Ephrem himself (only a small number of genuine verse homilies by Ephrem survive).

Authorship and Date

Only in the case of Nos. 1–5 and 31–39 do we know who wrote the poems translated here. Nos. 1–5 are all by St Ephrem, the greatest of all Syriac poets, and date from the third quarter of the fourth century (St Ephrem died in 373). The first three come from the cycle of hymns on the Nativity, with the other two are from the cycle entitled 'On the Church.'

Nos. 31–39 are by Simeon, a potter from the village Geshir, whose poetic talents were discovered by Jacob of Serugh. These are the only poems of his which survive, but they gave rise to a genre of liturgical poems known as *Quqyatha* or potter's songs. Simeon must have flourished about AD 500.

The remainder of the texts in this collection are by unknown authors. It is likely that the majority will belong approximately to the fifth or early sixth century. Nos. 6–21 constitute the collection of Hymns on the Virgin Mary, published by T. J. Lamy in the second volume of his four–volume edition of works he considered to be by Ephrem (he was definitely wrong in the case of these hymns, and in the case of Nos. 25–27, which he subsequently published in his third volume; for details, see SOURCES). Lamy edited these hymns from early medieval liturgical manuscripts; many more such hymns remain unpublished in other early manuscripts, and it is from one such unpublished collection that Nos. 28–30 have been translated. In more recent liturgical manuscripts containing collections of hymns the scribes have usually made considerable abbreviations, cutting out many verses, or even putting together odd verses from two or more originally quite different hymns. Unfortunately it was from these late manuscripts that the printed editions of the Fenqitho, or festal hymnary, in the West Syrian tradition was made, and so

they do not provide the reader with a true idea of the riches of early Syriac liturgical poetry (for some correspondances between the texts translated here and the printed editions of the Fenqitho, see under SOURCES). It is, nevertheless, from the Syrian Catholic printed edition of the Fenqitho that No. 40, the Lament of the Virgin at the foot of the Cross, has been taken, since I have not come across a better text in early manuscripts.

Nos. 22–4 are in the form of soghyatha, and featured as hymns 18-20 in Lamy's collection of Hymns on Mary; they have been translated here however, from an improved edition by Dom E. Beck, who printed them as an appendix to his edition of Ephrem's Hymns on the Nativity.

Nos. 41–44, dialogue poems which are also in the form of soghyatha, are (with the exception of No. 44, published more recently) taken from a collection of dialogue soghyatha published by the Syrian Orthodox Monastery of St Ephrem in Holland Two of these, No. 41 on the Angel and Mary, and No. 43 on Mary and the Magi, are sometimes attributed to Narsai, and feature in the main edition of his work; the attribution, however, cannot be correct, and they are also well known in Syrian Orthodox and Maronite liturgical tradition. No. 42, on Mary and Joseph, is known only in West Syriac liturgical manuscripts, while No. 44, on Mary and Christ as the Gardener, is found only in the East Syriac tradition.

Of the three verse homilies (Nos. 45–47), the first retells the narrative of the annunciation and the visit to Elizabeth: this represents the first half of the first memra on the Virgin Mary published by Dom E. Beck in his *Nachtrage zu Ephraem Syrus*, while No. 46 represents the second memra in Beck's volume. The second half of Becks first memra continues with Joseph's discovery that Mary was pregnant, but in most manuscripts this is a quite separate memra (and with a somewhat different text); accordingly, it has been treated as a separate work in this collection of translations, where it features as No. 47. Though these verse homilies are all sometimes attributed to Ephrem in the manuscripts, the attribution is certainly incorrect, and it is likely that they will belong to at least a century after his lifetime.

In the translations I have aimed at providing a fairly close prose rendering, arranged so as to reflect the line structure

(though not, of course, the metre) of the Syriac originals. Biblical references and allusions are identified in the margins, and at the end, following a select bibliography, a series of indexes is provided.

Finally, a brief word might be said about some texts that have not been included here. The verse homily by Narsai, and the collection of verse homilies by Jacob of Serugh on Mary, have all been excluded, on grounds of length. An English translation of several of Jacob's fine homilies is, in fact, to appear in due course; this has been done by Mary Hansbury, and will be published by the St Vladimir's Seminary Press (Crestwood, NY).

SOURCES

1–3. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate* (CSCO 186, Scriptores Syri 82; Louvain, 1959).

4–5. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Ecclesia* (CSCO 198, Scriptores Syri 84; Louvain, 1960).

6–21. T. J. Lamy, *Sancti Ephraem Syri Hymni et Sermones*, II (Malines, 1886), 519–590.

22–24. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate* (CSCO 186, Scriptores Syri 82; Louvain, 1959), 191–209. (An earlier edition is to be found in Hymns on Mary nos. 18–20, ed. Lamy, II, 605–42).

25–27. T. J. Lamy, *Sancti Ephraem Syri Hymni et Sermones*, III (Malines, 1889), 969–90.

28–30. British Library, Add. 14520, ff. 19, 24–26.

31–39. S. Euringer, "Die neun Topferlieder (*Quqyatha*) des Simeon von Geshir", *Oriens Christianus* 13 (1913), 221–35.

40. *Breviarium iuxta ritum Ecclesiae Antiochenae Syrorum*, V (Mosul, 1892), 276–8.

41–43. S. P. Brock, *Soghyatha Mgabbyatha* (St Ephrem's Monastery, Glane 1982), nos. 6–8. (An earlier edition of no. 41 is to be found in Hymns on Mary no. 17, ed. Lamy, II, 589–604; and of no. 43 in E. Beck, *Hymnen de Nativitate*, 209–16, Soghitha 4; both nos. 41 and 43 are sometimes attributed to Narsai, and appear in the appendix to A. Mingana's edition, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Hymni et Carmina*, II (Mosul, 1905), 367–76, = nos. II and III).

44. S. P. Brock, "Mary and the Gardener: an East Syrian dialogue soghitha for the Resurrection", *Parole de l'Orient* 11 (1983), 223–34.

45. E. Beck, *Nachtrage zu Ephraem Syrus* (CSCO 363, Scriptores Syri 159; Louvain, 1975), 20–23 (Sermo I, lines 1–196). (Note that from line 153 onwards one line of the translation corresponds to two lines in Beck's numbering).

46. E. Beck, *Nachtrage zu Ephraem Syrus* (CSCO 363, Scriptores Syri 159; Louvain, 1975), 39–42 (Sermo II). (Use has also been made of a manuscript not known to Beck, British Library Or. 8606, copied in Edessa in AD 823).

47. S. P. Brock, *Luqqata d-Memre d-'al Ktabay Qudsha* (St Ephrem's Monastery, Glane 1993), 57–67. (A different recension of the narrative is to be found in E. Beck, *Nachtrage zu Ephraem Syrus*, 24–37, as lines 267–825 of his Sermo I).

Incomplete texts of many of the hymns translated in this volume can also be found in the printed editions of the Fenqitho (Syrian Orthodox, 3 vols; Pampakuda, 1962–3; Syrian Catholic, 7 vols; Mosul, 1886–96), as indicated in the list below; in order to highlight the fragmented nature of these madrashe in the printed editions the numbers of those verses which they preserve are given in square brackets.

No. 6 – Mosul edition, II, 520-1 [1, 2, 5, 10–12]; Pampakuda edition I, 199–200 [5, 12–14, 2].

No. 7 – Mosul edition, VI, 530 [1, 2, 5, 10, 9, 8]; Pampakuda edition I, 166 [1, 2, 10].

No. 13 – Mosul edition, VI, 525–6 [1–3].

No. 14 – Mosul edition, II, 524–5 [2–4]; Pampakuda edition I, 200 [6, 2].

No. 15 – Mosul edition, II, 486 [1, 2, 12, 13, 16 3, 4, 10, 21, 20, 8].

No. 20 – Pampakuda edition I, 362 [1, 5, 7].

No. 23 – Mosul edition, II, 525–6 [2, 1, 4–7, 10, 12, 19, 20, 22, 26].

No. 24 – Mosul edition, III, 433 [1–3, 5, 20, 30].

No. 25 – Mosul edition, II, 89–90 [1–5, 12–14]; Pampakuda edition I, 56 [1, 3, 5, 7, 9].

No. 26 – Pampakuda edition I, 56–57 [5, 7, 16].

No. 27 – Mosul edition, II, 109 [1–7].

No. 29 – Pampakuda edition, I, 201–2 [1, 2]; III, 142 [1, 2, 5, 6].

No. 30 – Mosul edition, II, 229 [2].

No. 41 – Mosul edition, II, 94–6 [6–9, 11–15, 51–52]; IV, 875 [6–9, 11–15, 51–21]; Pampakuda edition, I, 57–8 (alternate verses; angel's words only).

No. 43 – Pampakuda edition, I, 185–7 [alternate verses; words of Magi only].

No. 45 – Mosul edition, II, 95–6 [lines 1–65 with many omissions and differences].

I. PRAYER SONGS

1

(St Ephrem, Hymns on the Nativity, no. 11)

St Ephrem likes to mediate on the paradoxes surrounding the Incarnation, and here he explores some of the paradoxes that surround Mary as a result of her giving birth to the divine Word. In the second verse Mary is described as Christ's 'sister' as well as brother; the reason for this becomes evident in the second and fourth of the hymns translated here: the very presence of Christ in Mary's womb serves as her baptism – just as the Jordan waters were sanctified by Christ's presence in them at his baptism. Since it is through baptism Christians become brothers and sisters to Christ (Romans 8:29) Mary can thus take on this title as well as 'mother' and 'bride'.

1. No one quite knows, Lord, what to call
Your mother: should we call her 'virgin'?
– but her giving birth is an established fact;
or 'married woman'?
– but no man has known her. If Your mother's case
is beyond comprehension, who can hope to
understand Yours?

Response: Praise to You to whom all things are easy,
for You are almighty.

2. She alone is Your mother,
but she is Your sister with everyone else.
She was Your mother,
she was Your sister, she was Your bride too,
along with all chaste souls. You, who are Your
mother's beauty,
Yourself adorned her with everything!

3. She was, by her nature, Your bride already
before You came; she conceived in a manner
quite beyond nature after You had come,
O Holy One, and was a virgin
when she gave birth to You in most holy fashion.

4. With You Mary underwent all that
married women undergo: conception
– but without intercourse; her breast filled
with milk
– but against nature's pattern: You made her,
the thirsty earth, Is.53:2
all of a sudden into a fountain of milk!

5. If she could carry You, it was because You,
the great mountain, Dan.2:35
had lightened Your weight; if she feeds You,
it is because
You have taken on hunger; if she gives
You her breast, Mt.4:2
it is because You, of Your own will,
had thirsted; if she fondles You, Jn.4:7
You who are the fiery coal of mercy,
preserved her bosom unharmed. Is.6:7

6. Your mother is a cause of wonder:
the Lord entered into her
– and became a servant; He who is the
Word entered
– and became silent within her;
Thunder entered her
– and made no sound; there entered
the Shepherd of all,
and in her He became the Lamb, bleating as
He comes forth.

7. Your mother's womb has reversed the roles:
the Establisher of all entered in His richness,
but came forth poor; the Exalted One entered her,
but came forth meek; the Splendrous
One entered her,
but came forth having put on a lowly hue.

8. The Mighty One entered, and put on insecurity
   from her womb; the Provisioner of all entered
   – and experienced hunger; He who gives drink
   to all entered
   – and experienced thirst: naked and stripped
   there came forth from her He who clothes all!

2

(St Ephrem, Hymns on the Nativity, no. 16)

Mary again speaks, addressing Christ. She reflects on her Son whose exterior image links him with Adam, while his interior image associates him with the Father (verse 3). This double aspect of Christ – the exterior and interior realities – is also to be seen in the Eucharistic Bread and Wine, whose interior reality, Christ's Body and Blood, is beheld by all who believe with love (verses 4–7). Mary then turns, in verses 9–11, to the paradox of her own relationship to her Son: whereas Christ's 'second birth' came from Mary (his first birth being from the Father), Mary's 'second birth' – her baptism – was effected throught Christ's own present in her womb. In the course of this exchange, Christ puts on the human body ('Your mother's robe') from Mary, while she puts on 'the robe of glory', which all Christians receive at baptism.

Although she has given birth, Mary goes on to reflect that her virginity is still preserved, and she contrasts her situation with that of two different Tamars who belonged to her ancestry: Absalom's sister Tamar had lost her virginity when she was raped by David's son Amnon (2 Sam. 13:1–22), while Judah's daughter-in-law Tamar had acquired Judah's 'hidden power' through conceiving by stealth through him (Gen. 38:6–30).

In the final two verses the poet takes over from Mary and speaks in his own voice, still addressing Christ. As a result of Mary's unparalleled experience, the normal roles of husband and wife are in her case reversed: Joseph ministers to Mary, the Ark of the Sanctuary, in whom his Lord resides.

1. "I will not begrudge it, my Son,
that You should be both with me
and with everyone else too:
to the person who confesses You, be God,
to whoever worships You, be Lord,
and to whoever loves You, be Brother,
and so You shall give life to all.

2. "When You resided in me
Your greatness also resided outside of me;
and when again I gave birth to You openly
Your Hidden Power
never left me: You are within me
and at the same time outside me,
thus causing Your mother astonishment.

3. "As I see Your exterior image
before my eyes, Your hidden image
is portrayed in my mind:
in Your manifest image
I have seen Adam, whereas in the hidden one   cp Gen. 1:27
I have seen Your Father
who is intermingled with You.

4. "Is it to me alone
that You have shown Your beauty
under two images?
Let the Bread portray You, and the mind too:
reside in the Bread – and in those who consume it;
Both in hidden and manifest form
let Your Church behold You, just like her who bore You.

5. "Whoever despises Your Bread
is like the person who despised Your Body;
someone distant in time who shows love for Your Bread
is like the person close to You in time
who had love for Your image.
Those who came first and those who came last   Mt. 20:16
have both seen You in both Bread and Body.

6. "Your Bread, my Child, is even more to be honoured
than Your Body, for unbelievers too
saw Your Body, whereas they fail to see
Your living Bread.
Those afar off in time rejoice
for their portion has surpassed
that of those who were close.

7. "Your image is portrayed in the Blood of grapes,
upon the Bread; it is depicted too on the heart
by the finger of love
using the pigments of faith.
Blessed is He who has set aside
carved images,
replacing them with the image of Truth.

8. "You are no ordinary human being
to whom I should sing ordinary lullabies,
for Your conception was novel
and Your birth full of wonder.
Without the Spirit who is able to sing of You?
It is a new utterance of prophecy
which stirs within me.

9. "How can I address You? Stranger to us,
yet born of us. Should I call You 'Brother',
or should it be 'Betrothed'?
Or again, 'Lord',
who gives to His mother
a second birth
that comes from the water?

10. "I am Your sister – from the House of David,
who is Your second father. Again, I am mother,
in view of Your conception;
and betrothed as well,
because of Your sanctity.
Handmaid and daughter too
by blood and water, for You have redeemed and
baptized me.

11. "O Son of the Most High
who have come and resided in me
so that I have become Your mother.
As I bore You
– Your second birth – so too have You given birth to me
a second time: You have put on Your mother's robe
– Your body, whereas I have put on Your glory.

12. "Amnon abused Tamar — 2 Sam. 13:11
who belonged to David's House;
virginity thus fell from both
and the pearl was lost
– but not so with mine,
for it is preserved in Your treasury
since You have put it on!

13. "Let the virginity of all
who are betrothed to You
be preserved intact for You:
this is the royal purple
which none may touch
apart from our King,
for virginity is like a veil for You, the High Priest.

14. "Her father in law's scent wafted from Tamar
for she had stolen fragrance, — cp Gen. 38:18
whereas in the case of me, Joseph's betrothed,
not a whiff of him is on my clothes,
for it is the very Balsam which I have conceived.
Your conception, O Son of the Holy One,
has proved a wall of fire for me.

15. "Other flowers proved insipid
compared with the perfect scent
of the glorious Lily:
the Treasure Store of fragrance
has no need for any flower
or its scents: flesh kept its distance,
for it beheld in the womb a conception that stemmed
from the Spirit".

16. A wife ministers to her husband,
    he being her 'head' — 1 Cor. 11:3
    – but Joseph stood up
    to minister before his Lord
    who is there in Mary: the priest
    ministers before Your Ark
    because of Your holiness.

17. Moses carried down Tablets of stone — Ex. 34:29
    which his Lord had inscribed; Joseph escorted
    this chaste 'tablet'
    in whom the Creator's Son has resided:
    the old Tablets have been left behind
    now that the whole universe
    has been filled with Your teaching.

3

(St Ephrem, Hymns on the Nativity, no. 17)

In the first four verses Mary herself speaks; St Ephrem then himself addresses Christ directly (verses 4 and 5). Mary speaks again from verse 6 onwards (probably to verse 16, though it is not clear where the end of her speech comes), and she invites her fellow women, the sick, the suffering and the enslaved to come for comfort, healing and liberation to her Son. The last two verses (17–18) contain a polemic against the Marcionites, who held that the world was created by a 'Just God' who was different from the supreme God of love, who is a 'stranger' or 'alien' to the created world. Ephrem shows how the Creator and the God of love are one and the same with the help of the episode described in John 9:6; here Ephrem, in common with many of the Church Fathers, held that the blind man whom Jesus healed had been born without pupils, so the miracle is one of creation ('a novel fashioning') rather than just healing.

1. "The tiny Child whom I carry Himself carries me",
   said Mary; "He lowered His wings,
   and took me and placed me between His pinions;

He soared into the heavens, and promised me:
Both height and depth shall be your Son's". cp Lk. 1:33

Response: Praise to You, Son of the Creator, who love all.

2. "I saw Gabriel, and he called Him 'Lord'; Lk. 1:28
and the old Simeon, servant of the High Priest: Lk. 2:28
– he carried Him in honour. And I saw the Magi:
they bowed down to Him; while Herod I saw Mt. 2:11
troubled, because the King had come. Mt. 2:3

3. "Satan, who slew the newborn of the Hebrews, Ex. 1:16
wanting to destroy Moses, now kills the children Mt. 2:16
hoping that Life will die. To Egypt will I flee, Mt. 2:13
as Satan has come to Judaea to go toiling around
trying to hunt his own Hunter.

4. "In her virginity, Eve put on
leaves of shame, but Your mother has put on, Gen. 3:7
in her virginity, a robe of glory
that encompasses all, while to Him who covers all
she gives a body as a tiny garment".

5. Blessed is she, in whose heart and mind
You are: she is a royal palace,
because of You, O Royal Son. She is the sanctuary
for You, the High Priest. She knows no worries
or cares of home, or husband.

6. Eve proved the cranny – and the sepulchre –
for the accursed serpent; it entered her and dwelt there.
Its evil counsel her bread,
since she had become dust. But You are our Bread,
You are our bridal chamber, our robe of glory.

7. "Is any woman living in chastity afraid?
– He shall preserve her. Has any some sin?
– He shall forgive it. Has any some evil spirit?
– He shall drive it out. He it is who binds up
the wounds of the sick.

8. "Has any woman a child? Let him come and be brother
to my Beloved. Has she a daughter or niece?

Let her come and become
the betrothed of my Most Honoured One.
Has anyone a servant?
Let him release him to come to serve his Lord.

9. "My Son, the freeborn who bears Your yoke Mt. 11:30
has a single reward, while the servant who carries
the double yoke of two masters,
in heaven and on earth, – he shall have two blessings,
a double reward for his double burden.

10. "My Son, the freeborn girl is Your maidservant
if she serves You, whereas a girl who is in slavery
shall become free in You, and receive comfort,
for she has been liberated with that hidden freedom
that is stored up in her bosom if she loves You.

11. "Chaste women, my Beloved desires
to dwell in you; and you too who are unclean
He wishes to make holy. The churches, too,
He wants to adorn. Son of the Creator is He
who has come to restore all creation.

12. He has renewed the heaven, because foolish men
had worshipped the stars; He has renewed the earth
which had grown old in Adam. With His spittle Jn. 9:6
there took place a novel fashioning:
He who is capable of all things puts aright
both bodies and minds.

13. "Come, all you who are blind, receive light
without payment; come, you lame,
receive back the use of your legs; you who
are deaf and dumb,
receive back the use of your voices;
those whose hands are crippled shall also regain their use.

14. "He is the Creator's Son, whose treasure stores are filled
with every benefit. He who needs eyes,
let him approach Him:
He will fashion mud, and transform it,
fashioning flesh and giving light to the eyes.

15. "With a little mud He showed how,
through Him. Jn 9:6
our dust was fashioned. The soul of the dead
Lazarus, too,
witnesses to Him how by Him,
a person's breath Jn 11:43–44
is breathed into him. By these latter witnesses Gen. 2:7
we may believe that He is Son of God,
the First Principle.

16. "Gather together and come, you lepers,
receive cleansing
without any trouble; for there is no need,
as in Elisha's case, of dipping seven times 2 Kgs 5:14
in the river Jordan: Christ does not tire
people out any more
with the sprinklings that the priests of old used". Lev. 14:7

17. Elisha's 'seven times' symbolizes the purification 2 Kgs 5:10
of the woman with seven spirits; while the
hyssop and blood Lk.8:2;Lev.14:6
are powerful types too. There is no place here
for thinking that Christ is 'alien': Christ,
the Son of the Lord of all,
is not alienated from the Lord of all.

18. If it was the 'Just God' who made a body leprous,
while You cleansed and refashioned the body,
then it would be He who hated the body,
while You loved it;
but as it is, You fashioned it, and the bandages
that You put on it cry out that You are the
Creator's Son."

4

(St Ephrem, Hymns on the Church, no. 36)

In this hymn St Ephrem meditates on the theme of Christ as Light. The eye that lets in light is enabled to see clearly; similarly, by allowing Christ the Light to enter her very womb,

Mary is herself made luminous: Christ's presence within her makes her holy, serving as her baptism, just as his presence in the river Jordan at his Baptism sanctified, in sacred time, all baptismal water.

By contrast with Mary and the Jordan, which were both illumined from within themselves, Moses's radiance, as he descended from Mount Sinai, was only external. The radiance of Moses nevertheless serves for him as a sun, giving him Illumination; such, too, is the case both with the angels and with the righteous at the final resurrection: the latter, clothed with the raiment of light and glory, 'become their own light' (verse 11). Thought of the final resurrection, and the Last Judgement that accompanies it, leads Ephrem, who is conscious of his own sinfulness, to pray that he may be saved on that day when 'the wicked put on the garment of all their sins' (verse 12). His prayer, and the hymn, concludes with a final doxology.

1. When it is associated with a source of light
   an eye becomes clear:
   it shines with the light that provisions it,
   it gleams with its brightness,
   it becomes glorious with its splendour,
   adorned by its beauty.

Response: Blessed is the Creator of light.

2. As though on an eye,
   the Light settled in Mary,
   it polished her mind,
   made bright her thought
   and pure her understanding,
   causing her virginity to shine.

3. The river in which He was baptized — Mt. 3:16
   conceived Him again symbolically:
   the moist womb of the water
   conceived Him in purity,
   bore Him in chastity,
   made Him ascend in glory.

4. In the pure womb of the water
   you should recognize the Daughter of Man,
   who conceived, having known no man,
   who gave birth without intercourse,
   who brought up, through a gift.
   the Lord of that gift.

5. As the Daystar in the river,
   the Bright One in the tomb,
   He shone forth on the mountain top
   and gave brightness too in the womb.
   He dazzled as He went up from the river,
   gave illumination at His ascension.

6. The brightness which Moses put on — Ex.34:29–30
   was wrapped on him from without,
   whereas the river in which Christ was baptized
   put on Light from within;
   likewise did Mary's body, in which He resided,
   gleam from within.

7. Just as Moses gleamed
   with the divine glory
   because he saw the splendour briefly,
   how much more should the body
   wherein Christ resided gleam,
   and the river wherein he was baptized?

8. The brightness which the stammering Moses — Ex.4:10
   put on in the wilderness
   did not allow the darkness
   to darken the inside of his dwelling,
   for the light from his face
   served as a sun that went before his feet -

9. like the heavenly beings
   who need no other source of light
   for their eyes to see,
   for their pupils
   flow with light, and they are clothed
   in rays of glory.

10. For if the sun chases out darkness
without using light
apart from its own
- for the sun needs
no luminary for light,
seeing it is the source of its own rays -

11. so too, at the resurrection.
the righteous are light,
for their clothing is splendour,
their garment brightness:
they become their own light.
providing it themselves.

12. Save me, Lord. on that day
when the wicked put on
the garment of all their sins.
clothing full of stains,
whence spring up for them
darkness and torment,

13. Just as from the body
in times of sickness
there spring up
bitter pains and fever,
as fetters for its wrongdoing
and a rod to chastise it.

14. O Good One, who prepared for us
the sun by day
and by night the moon
with the candelabra of the stars,
may Your glorious comfort
reach me through Your grace.

15. Give thanks to the Creator of the light
wherein is depicted
the heavenly Light;
give praise to the Maker of the light
that is a symbol
of the light of our Saviour !

5

(St Ephrem, Hymns on the Church, no. 37)

Ephrem here continues with the theme of Christ as light. Eve and Mary are depicted as the world's two eyes. The left eye, Eve, malfunctions as a result of the Fall, and so does not let in the divine light of truth, with the result that the world goes astray. With Mary, however, who has allowed Christ the Light to reside in her very womb, the world has regained a right eye which functions properly, thus enabling humanity to see the way to God again.

1. Illumine with Your teaching
 the voice of the speaker
 and the ear of the hearer;
 like the pupil of the eye
 let the ears be illumined,
 for the voice provides the rays of light.

Response: Praise to You, O Light!

2. It is through the eyes (Mt. 6:22)
 that the body, with its members,
 is light in its different parts,
 is fair in all its conduct,
 is adorned in all its senses,
 is glorious in its various limbs.

3. It is clear that Mary
 is 'the land' that receives the source of light;
 through her it has illumined
 the whole world which, with its inhabitants,
 had grown dark through Eve,
 the source of all misfortunes.

4. Mary and Eve in their symbols
 resemble a body, one of whose eyes
 is blind and darkened.
 while the other
 is bright and clear,
 providing light for the whole.

5. The world, you see, has
   two eyes fixed in it:
   Eve was its
   left eye, blind,
   while the right eye.
   bright, is Mary.

6. Through the eye that was darkened
   the whole world was darkened
   and people groped
   and thought that every stone
   they stumbled upon was a god,
   calling falsehood truth.

7. But when it was illumined by the other eye,
   and the heavenly Light
   that resided in its midst
   humanity became reconciled once again,
   realizing that what they had stumbled on
   was destroying their very life.

6

(Hymns on Mary, no. 1)

Mary's experience doubly contradicts the normal course of nature: she conceives and gives birth without intercourse, and her breasts flow with milk despite her being a virgin, The anonymous poet invites Adam, the priests, prophets and patriarchs, to join other virgins in rejoicing over the salvation that has been brought about as a result of Mary's birthgiving: she has provided humanity with the Fruit of the Tree of Life which will undo the disastrous effects of the transgression of Adam and Eve, for whom the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, which they had picked in their disobedience to God's 'tiny command' (St Ephrem), had proved to be so bitter.

This, and most of the other hymns on Mary in this collection, belong liturgically to the Commemoration of the Virgin on December 26th in the West Syriac Calendar, and on the Second Friday after the Nativity in the East Syriac Calendar.

1. The Virgin has invited me to sing in wonder
   of her story,
   so grant me, O Son of God, Your gift of wonder,
   enrich my lyre's song with Your gift
   and may I depict for Your mother
   a portrait full of beauty.

Response: Praise to Your Nativity, both divine and human.

2. She conceived in her womb, without any
   intercourse – a mighty wonder;
   there was milk in her breast – against nature's custom:
   virginity preserved, and yet milk in her pure body;
   how full of wonder is this
   – who is equal to tell of it?

3. Mary the Virgin gave birth to a Son in holy fashion
   and she gives milk to the Provisioner of all races;
   she supports on her knees Him who supports all things,
   she is both virgin and mother:
   what is it she is not?

4. Holy is her body, resplendent her soul, pure her mind,
   her understanding most luminous;
   her thought is most perfect,
   chaste, temperate, pure,
   well proved, and full of beauty.

5. Let the entire band of virgins rejoice in Mary,
   seeing that one of their number has knelt down
   and given birth
   to that Hero who bears up all creation,
   by whom enslaved humanity
   has received liberation.

6. Let great Adam, stung by the serpent,
   rejoice in Mary,
   for she has given him an Offshoot
   which he has consumed, and so has spurned the
   accursed serpent,
   for by this Herb the serpent's sting, that had
   slain him,
   has been healed.

7. Let the priests rejoice at the blessed Woman
who knelt down and gave birth
to the great Priest who Himself became a
sacrificial Victim,
thus sparing them from having to make sacrifice
When He in His own person became Victim,
thus reconciling His Father.

8. Let the entire band of prophets rejoice in Mary,
for in her their visions have reached their
conclusion;
in her their prophecy has found its fulfilment,
in her, again, their words have been found true,
and have taken on meaning.

9. Let the entire company of the patriarchs
rejoice in Mary:
she has received their blessing
and shown them to be perfected in her Son.
The visionaries, the just and the priests, too,
have been made pure in Him.

10. Mary has provided a sweet Fruit for humanity:
and in place of that bitter fruit
which Eve had plucked from the Tree, Gen.3:6
through Mary's Fruit
the entire creation has received sweet delight.

11. The Tree of Life, which lay hidden in Paradise, Gen.2:9
has sprung forth in Mary, and shot up from her:
in its shade all creation sits
as it showers its fruit
on both those far and near.

12. Mary has woven a robe of glory to give to her
ancestor
who had been stripped naked among the trees; Gen.3:7
he put it on in modesty, and thus acquired beauty;
his wife had laid him low, but his daughter
lent him support
and he arose all valiant.

13. Eve and the serpent dug a deep pit and cast
Adam into it,
but Mary joined ranks with the angel
and drew him up from the whirlpool
through that Hidden Power which had come out
into the open
and brought Adam back to life.

14. The Virgin Vine gave forth the Cluster of grapes
whose Wine is sweet. Is.65:8
Both Adam and Eve who were mourning
received comfort in their grief:
having tasted of that Medicine of Life,
they received comfort in their grief.

7

(Hymns on Mary, no. 2)

The poet reflects on the wonder of Mary's birthgiving, and on the varied benefits it brings to humanity; in particular, she brings new hope and freedom to all women.

1. Through your gift may I sing songs of discernment
to the Virgin who wondrously became mother:
she is both virgin and mother! Praise to Him who chose her!

Response: Blessed is He who shone forth for us from Mary
and who has saved us.

2. In the ranks of chaste girls she stands, virgin-like
but bearing in serenity the fruit which mothers bear:
the Virgin has a child – who will not fail to wonder ?

3. Milk does not flow for women in their virginity,
and where there is milk, virginity is no longer present.
But in Mary is this wonder: in virginity she gave birth!

4. She is a field that has never known a ploughman,
yet from her has shot up a Sheaf full of blessings:
without any seed, she has provided fruit for creation!

5. She is a ship bearing a cargo of treasures,
bringing to the poor the riches of heaven.
From her the dead too have been enriched, for it is Life
that she bore,

6. In Mary all virgins can find pride,
for she is a virgin who was the source of benefit
from whom the Light shone forth for those who
sit in darkness. Lk. 1:79

7. In Mary is Eve's bowed head raised up again,
for she has carried the Child who seized hold
of the adder Is. 11:8
Those fig leaves of shame have been swallowed
up on glory! Gen. 3:7

8. Two virgins have there been for humanity,
one the source of life, the other the cause of death:
in Eve death arose, but Life shone out through Mary.

9. The daughter gave support to her mother who had fallen,
and because she had clothed herself in fig leave of shame
Gen. 3:7
her daughter wove and gave to her a garment of glory.

10. In Mary there has come hope for the female sex:
from the insults they have heard and the shame
they have felt
she has given them freedom; they are no longer
subject to blame.

11. All married women today find joy,
for like them she has borne the Fruit
which has given to their own children life. Praise to
His Sender!

12. In Mary has light shone out, driving back the darkness
which had entered in through Eve and disrupted humanity.
Creation, formerly darkened, is now illumined through Mary!

8

(Hymns on Mary, no. 3)

In this hymn Mary hereself warns people not to pry into the mystery of her Son, seeing that the paradoxes surrounding the Incarnation defy human logic.

1. Let Mary in her purity give praise
to the Son who has shone forth in compassion
from a virgin womb
that has known no intercourse:
She is the mother who has given birth in wonder
to the very Son of God who has shone forth.

Response: Praise to Him who has shone forth from you most wonderfully.

2. Let Mary loudly proclaim
to the crowds gathered at the feast
"Let no one pry into my Son,
for none is able to investigate Him:
before Him dispute falls silent,
and all the experts have to admit defeat."

3. Let her raise her pure voice
and give thanks to You, Lord,
for it was Your love which drew You to come to birth,
first residing in a virgin womb
and then coming forth out into the open:
blessed are You, O Hidden One, who has visited us!

4. Let her mouth reprove the foolish
who pry into Your glorious birth;
by her let the learned be reproved
as they stir up disputes over You;
let the mind of the hesitant be changed by her
who has given birth without knowledge of a man.

9

(Hymns on Mary, no. 4)

The young girls who are addressed in the opening verse were probably the members of the women's choir which originally sang these hymns. They are invited to reflect on the many wonders surrounding Mary, as she nurses the infant Christ.

1. Leap for joy, young girls,
   at the Virgin, filled with wonder,
   for she knelt down and gave birth to the Hero
   who trussed up and bound the Rebel
   to stop him seducing young girls.

Response: Praise to you, O Son of God.

2. The Rebel seduced your mother Eve
   and she consumed that lethal fruit,
   but now your sister Mary
   has rooted out that tree which produced death,
   and she has provided a Fruit which gives life to all.

3. In her womb Fire resides,
   in her bosom is a mighty wonder:
   she grasps this Fire in her fingers,
   and in her lap she carries the burning Sun:
   how awesome it is to tell of this!

4. She carries Him who fashions babes,
   she gave birth to the Maker of the human race.
   To the Provisioner of all she proffers milk!
   Who is capable of telling
   of this matter so full of wonder?

5. Mary is a source for wonder:
   in her soul she was wise,
   in her body holy,
   in her thought resplendent
   as she carried the burning Flame.

6. How is it possible
that wonder should pass from her soul
or amazement from her mind
or fear from her thought,
seeing that she has given birth–and yet remained a virgin?

7. In her hands she carries the Infant
– and yet she sees virginity's seals on her body.
Milk flows warm in her breasts,
yet she has not stirred in her virginity:
each day she is filled with wonder.

8. How discreet were her lullabies
when listeners were present;
she sang as though to a babe,
but when they had moved away
she worshipped Him as Lord of Majesty.

9. As she carried the Child in her lap
her soul was filled with wonder:
proud that He was her son,
but knowing well that He was her Lord.
She carried Him as both son and Lord.

10. She saw that she was with child,
yet her virginity still remained:
this novel occurrence
gave her strength to understand
that He whom she bore was God.

11. That Virgin, surrounded with wonder,
shone out amid this hidden mystery,
aware who He was, and whose Son
was that blessed Fruit which she was bearing.
In all things was she wise.

12. Ezekiel, born in the Captivity, Ez. 1:1
had seen with prophecy's eye
the virgin, the daughter of David,
and depicted an image of her virginity cp Ez.44:2
in his revelations that were sent from God.

13. In the land of the Chaldeans
    prophecy had depicted an image for Mary,
    placing her in the Book of the Prophets,
    guarding her story in the Scriptures,
    so that any who read might understand.

14. The Lord made manifest to the prophet
    in the midst of the priestly courts
    a Door which was kept tight closed, saying
    "This shall be closed, Ez. 44:2
    since by it God shall enter in".

10

(Hymns on Mary, no. 5)

The 'inquisitive scribe' is warned not to apply rational human logic to the mystery of the Incarnation. Three miraculous 'birthgivings' from the Old Testament are adduced: the Salt which Elisha threw into the spring which supplied Jericho with water, thereby making that town's bad water supply wholesome (2 Kings 2:19–22); the staff of Aaron, which alone of all the Israelites' staffs sprouted when placed in the Ark (Numbers 17:1–10); and the curious case of the tree on the site where Abraham was to sacrifice Issac (Genesis 22): according to a tradition already known to Ephrem (see Introduction), the tree miraculously gave birth to the ram, which Abraham then sacrificed, in accordance with the angel's instructions – thereby saving Isaac.

1. The inquisitive scribe hears of the Virgin giving birth
   and does not believe, for he observes that by nature
   it is not possible for virgins to give birth;
   but in Mary nature has been defeated and overcome,
   for she conceived as a virgin, and gave birth as a virgin:
   her path is not one that nature can tread.

2. Her child shone forth and appeared,
   just as other children do,
   but His mother remained a virgin:
   she was clothed in wonder.

Fruit she bore, but her womb remained sealed –
utterly new was the path which she trod.
A miracle grants to the virgin a child,
a gift that nature cannot give to a woman.

3. I will sing of that virgin, who was, through grace,
mother to the Lord of all; she conceived
without seed,
she gave birth and bore fruit,
having known no man;
a source of wonder to all the world has she become,
for she gave birth to the Wonderful
in a manner that none can tell, Is 9:6
a way too deep for the scribes' enquiries.

4. A young girl provides milk, a virgin gives birth –
who will not be amazed at this glorious mother
who kneels down to give birth, who gives
milk to her child,
who resembles an ordinary mother in all these things.
May the scribe be ashamed who enquires
into this mother
who, though a virgin, was mother to her Creator.

5. The symbol of you is to be found, O Virgin,
in the covenant Ark;
in prophecy was your fair image depicted
and placed in the Scriptures for him
who is discerning:
they proclaim you in that new vessel,
your Son was the salt which restored
the fountain 2Kgs 2:20–22
by which the whole world, that have become
dead, was revived.

6. They depict you too in the staff,
placed in the Ark; Num. 17:8–9
it sprouted forth without being planted – to
proclaim your tale,
this staff which, though unwatered,
was crowned with leaves

to be a parable of the Virgin
who sprouted forth, to provide us with the
wondrous Fruit.
It is her symbol that is hidden in the Levite's staff.

7. Never before, and never again,
has a tree given birth to a lamb here on earth, Gen.22:13
and no other virgin has given birth without
any man's help.
Mary and the tree are one;
the lamb was hung up in its branches,
as our Lord was on Golgotha;
the lamb saved Isaac, as our Lord saved creation.

8. When he descended to earth, he did not leave
his chariot in heaven;
when he dwelt in Mary's womb, the heavens
were not without him;
when he slept in the boat, it was not some
other who restrained the wind; Lk 8:23–24
when he changed water into wine Jn 2:9
the Word did not leave that body,
but in all this he manifested himself as God.

11

(Hymns on Mary, no. 6)

The Hebrew women, on hearing Isaiah's prophecy that a virgin would give birth (Isaiah 7:14), were filled with excitement; how much more should the women's choir rejoice now that Isaiah's prophecy has found its fulfilment.

1. Make ready, you band of virgins,
clap your hands, sing songs of praise,
for a virgin has given birth to a great wonder,
and has herself become a wonder to her fellows.

2. Isaiah summoned all the young girls,
he revealed a mystery to the virgins:
"A virgin shall conceive without a man, Is.7:14
she shall give birth to the Wonderful
in holy wise". Is.9:6

3. Isaiah uttered through revelation,
and excitement seized the young girls:
"Who is it? And where, and when", they asked,
"shall this wonderful thing come true?"

4. The prophet's words agitated them,
for he sang to the Hebrew women of
unheard things:
"A virgin shall conceive". Chaste women trembled Is.7:14
at the wonder of which he spoke through prophecy.

5. "A virgin shall conceive", Isaiah sang, Is.7:14
but he explained not where, nor when.
In Mary was the prophecy fulfilled,
and she was recognized as that wondrous virgin.

6. The prophet stirred them with his visions,
and many were the questions the young girls
asked:
"When is it this unheard of event shall
take place,
that a virgin shall give birth as prophesied?"

7. In Mary all symbols hidden in the prophetic
Scriptures
receive their explanation.
From her has sprung the Sun of righteousness, Mal.4:2
and at his epiphany the whole world shone bright.

8. Mary was the vine whence sprang
the shoot of Jesse, as Scripture says. Is.11:1
To fulfil the prophetic symbol
he was brought up in Nazareth, fulfilling all. Mt.2:23

9. As water is held back within the veil, Prov.30:4
so the virgin is with child, having known no man.
In Mary all the figures receive fulfilment,
in her the signs and prophecies find their goal.

12

(Hymns on Mary, no. 7)

All who have discernment are invited to join in wonder at Mary, the dove who gave birth to the Eagle (verse 3). From the middle of verse 3 onwards Mary herself sings, addressing her words to her Son. She goes on to invite Ezekiel and Isaiah to come and behold the one whom they had foretold in prophecy.

1. Come, all you who have discernment,
   let us wonder
   at the virgin mother, David's daughter.
   Herself most fair, to the Wonderful she gave birth; Is.9.6
   she is the spring that provides the Fountain, Joel 3:18
   she the ship that bears joy from the Father,
   that carries good news in her pure womb;
   she took on board, and escorts,
   the great Steersman of creation
   through whom peace reigns
   on earth and in heaven. cp Col. 1:20

2. Come, let us wonder at the virgin most pure,
   wondrous in herself,
   unique in creation,
   she gave birth, yet knew no man;
   her pure soul with wonder was filled
   daily her mind gave praise
   in joy at the twofold wonder:
   her virginity preserved, her child most dear.
   Blessed is He who shone forth from her!

3. A young dove, she carried Cant. 6:8
   the Eagle, the Ancient of days, Dan. 7:13
   singing praise as she carried Him
   in her lovely songs:
   "O Son of the Bounteous One, in a tiny nest
   you have chosen to grow; melodious harp,
   you are silent like a child, please let me
   sing to You
   with the lyre whose chords stir the cherubim;
   pray let me speak to You.

4. "Your home, my *Son*, is higher than all,
yet it was Your wish to make me Your home.
Heaven is too small to contain Your splendour,
yet I, poorest of creatures, am carrying You.
Let Ezekiel come and see You on my knees:
let him kneel down and worship You, and acknowledge
that it was You he saw there lifted up by the cherubim — Ez.1
above the chariot, and let him call me blessed
who carry You now.

5. "The very chariot stops, amazed
that I carry its Master;
the cherubim cry out with trembling,
'Blessed is Your splendour in Your place'; — Ez. 3:12
–that place is with me, my bosom is Your home!
Your radiance rests on my knees,
the throne of Your majesty is held in my arms.
Instead of the chariot wheels,
my fingers clasp You. I too will cry out
'Blessed are You in Your place!'

6. "Isaiah the prophet proclaimed
'A virgin shall conceive and give birth.' — Is. 7:14
Come, Isaiah, and look on me; let us rejoice together,
for I have given birth, with my virginity still sealed.
O prophet of the Spirit, rich in your visions,
look upon Emmanuel who was hidden from your eyes; — Is. 7:14
raise your voice and rebuke the harlot
Sion who spurned you and refused to believe
that I gave birth in my virginity,
as you yourself testify.

7. "Come, all you who have discernment,
vocal advocates of the Spirit,
prophets who beheled hidden things
in your true visions;
you farmers who sowed seed, and slept in hope, — Mk. 4:27
rise up and rejoice at the harvest: look, in my arms
I clasp the Wheat-Sheaf of life
that provides Bread for the hungry,
that feeds the needy. Rejoice with me, for I carry
the Sheaf full of joys."

13

(Hymns on Mary, no. 8)

Elizabeth greeted Mary by calling her 'blessed' (Luke 1:42). The poet enumerates some of the reasons why such an acclamation is appropriate.

1. Come, let us call Mary 'blessed'
   –the destitute girl who became rich through the Royal Son.
   How great her blessed state, twice over her memory
   should be kept:
   let all peoples make great their praise of her.

Response: Blessed is Your Epiphany which has illumined Creation.

2. Mary said herself "All generations shall call me blessed Lk.1:48
   because of Him to whom I have given birth."
   Let me too call her blessed, for she has invited me
   –and this is a duty which all the discerning should observe

3. In truth is she blessed, for she has been chosen
   to be mother to Him who brings all to rebirth.
   With her milk she gave suck to the Provisioner of all;
   Blessed is He who resided with her in order to
   give freedom to all!

4. Blessed is she who has become for Creation
   a fountain which burst forth with bounties galore:
   from her there has shone forth the Light for all of Creation;
   let Creation strive its best as it calls her 'blessed.'

5. Blessed is she, for she conceived without a man's help;
   she rejoiced in birthgiving without there being any seed.
   The pains of married women did not touch her
   yet she had the joy of a mother's fruit.

6. My tongue is too small to tell of her blessing:
   wondrous in every aspect is our Lady most blessed.
   Her seals of chastity were preserved,
   yet she gives birth to a Child who removes all sorrows!

7. Blessed is She yet again, for her blessings have multiplied:
all peoples shall grow rich at her birthgiving,
for all peoples shall eat from that Fruit of Life
which has shone forth from her – a Fruit which will never fail.

8. Blessed is she, for no man has known her
in marital union,
and by that Child to whom she gave birth
she has set aside the curse that lay upon the offspring of Adam.

14

(Hymns on Mary, no. 9)

In the spirit of the previous hymn the poet now addresses Mary directly, calling her 'Blessed.'

1. Blessed are you, Mary, born in poverty,
you became mother of the Lord of kings:
He whose glory fills the heavens
dwelt in your womb in sacred fashion.
Blessed are your breasts which lovingly suckled Him,
blessed your tongue that eagerly sang to Him,
Your arms clasped Him, and you became the chariot
conveying the Fiery One!

2. Blessed are you, Mary, whose womb became
the place of the King, wherein He dwelt–
He who gives crowns to potentates,
who accords to rulers their position.
You spring from the tribe of Judah,
you come from the house of David:
glorious is your lineage, O Virgin
who has become mother to David's Son!

3. Blessed are you, the maiden who bore
the Lion's Whelp of which Jacob wrote. Gen. 49:9
He abased Himself and sucked from you
the pure milk on which he grew.
He became a lamb from the virgin ewe
so as to offer up that sacrifice which would deliver us.
The tree which provided the lamb prefigures you: Gen. 22:13
through it Isaac was delivered.

4. Blessed are you, and most blessed, for in you
Eve's curse was annulled from womankind.
In you the bill of debt was paid Col. 2:14
that the serpent had written for all mankind,
for you have given birth to the Treasure
which gives endless benefit to all the world.
In you the Light shone out: the rule of darkness
was swallowed up and ceased.

5. Blessed are you, Mary, whose child was seen
upon that chariot, full of wonder, cp. Ez. 1
which raised up blessings to him
from those wheels endowed with voice,
while the cherubim with thounderous voice
directed their praise in awe,
Blessed are you who embraced Him,
fondled Him as a mother,
and bowed to Him like those wheels.

6. Blessed are you, mother, full of grace,
all generation call you thrice blessed Lk 1:48
crying out with their voices,
for from you has the Child shone forth.
The islands, all nations and peoples
call you blessed;
blessed are you, most pure,
for with you and in you abides the heavenly Blessing.

15

(Hymns on Mary, no. 10)

Taking his cue from Isaiah's prophecy of a child who would be called 'Wonderful' (Isaiah 9:6), the poet addresses Christ end recounts the wonders of the Nativity.

The second and fourth verses are closely modelled on verses 1 and 9 of no. 15 of St Ephrem's Hymns on the Nativity. (In the middle of verse 18 the printed text is evidently corrupt, and these lines have accordingly been omitted in the translation).

1. Permit me, Lord to tell with faith Your story:
   You are 'the Wonderful', O God, Is. 9:6
   Wonderful in very truth are You,
   for wonder cannot attain to You,
   the One called 'Wonderful' in prophecy.
   'Wonderful' You are, and full of marvel,
   marvel that consists entirely in wonder.
   Wonderful is Your conception,
   wonderful is Your birth;
   You are entirely a source of wonder,
   a wonder that knows no bounds.

Response: Blessed is He who made great

the memory of His mother
both here and in heaven above.

2. In You may I commence, and in Your confidence may I reach the end,
   O God who knows no bounds.
   May I open my mouth in response to Your lowliness:
   fill it, Lord, from Your treasure store!
   I am the land, and You are the Farmer:
   sow Your voice in the voice of me, a useless man,
   for it was You who sowed Yourself in the pure girl
   as a Child without flux
   who shone forth from the Father
   and came from Mary
   who, without being sown, gave forth a fruit.

3. Mary knelt down and gave birth
   to the Hero of all ages, the Hero of mighty deeds,
   concealed in His Being,
   hidden in His Divinity.
   She fondled Him and sang to Him;
   as she kissed Him, He lept up to meet her;
   He gazed at her, smiling as a baby
   as He lay in the manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes. Lk. 2:7
   When He began to cry
   she got up and gave Him milk;
   she embraced Him as she sang to Him,
   swaying her knees until he became still.

4. David Your ancestor sang an ode to You
   before You came,
   O Only-Begotten God;
   for he sang to You in his prophecy
   of the gold of Sheba, Ps. 72:15
   – and now his song has become fact,
   for here are gold, myrrh and incense, Mt. 2:11
   piled up before You, O mighty Child,
   gold for Your royalty,
   incense for Your divine Being,
   myrrh for Your humanity.

5. Behold, You are in Your Father, in Mary,
   and on the Chariot,
   in the manger, and in every place!
   In truth You are in Your Father, without any doubt
   You are in Mary,
   upon the Chariot, and in the lowly manger,
   You are in every place, for You are the Maker,
   You are in all, for You are the Fashioner.
   You are from the Father,
   yet You are from Mary too;
   You are the One,
   You are He who has come and is to come.

6. Alas for him who inquisitively seeks out and
   investigates
   the depths of Your divinity;
   alas for him who fails to confess You,
   alas for him who shows You no love,
   alas for him who has no faith in You,
   alas for him who thinks that You are deficient.
   Blessed is he who has written 'You are God',
   – a blessing from Your Father,
   a blessing from Your love,
   a blessing from Your Spirit,
   shall be upon him who rejoices at Your birth!

7. At You Michael's fiery ranks quake –
   the Child who is God!
   The Cherubim and other beasts harnessed
   to the Chariot Ez. 1

with its eloquent Wheels
are insufficient for You, O Son of El Shaddai;
yet Mary's chaste bosom has contained You,
for thus did Your humility will it.
You were contained,
You the uncontainable –
for the sea of Your mercies cannot be contained.

8. The sight of You delights, Your smell is sweet,
Your mouth is holy,
O holy God.
From all of You life bursts forth,
Your Bread is Life in Bethlehem,
the 'House of Bread',
for You are Life from the One who lives.
How sweet is Your breath, how lovely
Your baby state.
You are much to be desired as Food,
O Compassionate One,
for You are the Food of heaven, who gives
life to birds.
O Child born of a virgin,
blessed is he who yearns for Your Blood.

9. The shepherds offered to You a suckling lamb, Lk.2:15–16
O living Lamb of God;
they knelt down and worshipped You,
acknowledging You
and giving praise to You, O Lord,
the true Shepherd. Lk. 2:20
They returned back full of amazement
at the glory of the angel spirits
who gave praise, clearly proclaiming
"Glory to God in the supernal heights, Lk. 2:14
peace upon earth,
and good hope to human kind".

10. You are the Father's Child, and the Child of Mary:
You are one and the same,
O God the Word, who beyond nature came
forth from a mother,
but by nature come from the Father;

from the Jordan too, against wont, You came.
From river, from mother, from Father,
You are the single Child, O God,
and in You are hidden
endless utterances of wisdom
as You lie there and suck
the virgin milk from David's own daughter.

11. A womb has borne You, a manger suffices for You,
Simeon has carried You, O mighty God. Lk. 2:28
Here You are contained, confined and held
in bodily form, as someone who can be touched.
You are the Nature that cannot ever be contained,
yet here You are, contained within
the small manger !
Who can ever contain Your Being,
– yet here You are in a confined space !
Though You cannot be contained,
yet You have willed to be contained.
You the limitless Son who cannot be limited.

12. You resemble Your father, You resemble
Your mother. Which are you like?
God is without form.
Apart from Your colour You resemble
Your Father
in might and in Being,
in Nature too and in authority.
But You resemble Mary too, who gave You birth,
for from her You acquired human form.
You resemble Your Father,
You resemble Your mother,
You resemble Yourself.
To You be praise, who has taken on the
form of a servant. Phil. 2:7

13. How persistent You are, yet how humble,
and mighty as well !
Your genealogy is both revealed and hidden.
As a child, You throw Yourself in front of everyone,
smiling at all who encounter You:

Your eyes are merry with delight at all
who kiss You,
Your lips distil the fragrance of Life, Cant. 4:11
while balsam flows from Your fingertips. Cant. 5:5
Your eyes are lovely
as they gaze on Your mother
who hungers for the sight of You
– just as the Church's own children are
hungering for You.

14. A spiritual being of fire are You, the Son of Being
who was embodied from the daughter of David,
thus becoming part of the race of servants.
Both bones and flesh do You possess,
O Bodiless One who became embodied.
In truth You are no created being,
for it was You who brought creation into being.
You created because You so willed it,
You came into human existence because of
Your love
yet you exist in dominion
along with Your Begetter.

15. The Seraphim cry 'Holy', the Cherubim and
the angels utter blessing,
as they give praise to Your divinity; Is,6:3,Ez.3:12
with their bodies they cover over the manger
as Joseph and Mary stand by
in awe and trembling
at the sound of fearsome wings of the Seraphim
and the awesome thunder of their voices.
Who is sufficient for You?
who can contain You?
who can investigate You?
Who is so bold as to pry into Your Nativity?

16. O Son of God, You came to catch sheep
that are rational:
as Child of the virgin, You became Yourself
a Lamb,
and the sheep that were lost ran to meet You. cpMt.13:12
hearing Your voice as you bleated!

Here is a Lamb who has carried the dumb sheep,
here is a virgin who gives milk to the
Ancient of Days as she carries Him, Dan.7:13
Here is both the Shepherd and the Lamb,
both Priest and Sacrifice!
O suckling Lamb, how gentle You are!

17. Your mother is full of joy, full of joy is Joseph,
and You too are full of joy,
O Lamb of Paschal joy!
Mary who gave You birth rejoices
as she kisses you, 'the lion's cub' Gen.49:9
at whose sound that fox Herod was shaken, Lk.13:32
stupid king that he was:
You had brought his rule to an end, and
taken up Your own rule
which had been under his control;
for You are King, and King of kings.

18. You fashioned Adam out of the dust and
created Your own mother;
You depicted Your own Self in Your mind...
...But Your Will depicted Your humanity
at Your birth from Your Father:
You did not establish Your divine Self,
for You have no beginning;
it was in Mary that You established Yourself,
because You so willed it.

19. There stands Mary – Your mother, Your sister,
Your betrothed, Your handmaid,
who knelt down and gave You birth.
As she cuddless You, embracing You and
kissing You,
she gives praise in thanksgiving and prayer;
as she holds You, she provides You with milk,
she sings to You and smiles at Your infant ways,
while You, full of joy, suck her milk.
She who gave You birth is bewildered,
so too is she who gives you suck,
bewildered too is she whom You created:

by means of Yourself, O Son, settle the mind of
Your mother.

20. Teacher of His mother, God of His mother,
Lord of His mother,
both younger and older than His mother,
still Yourself, for You have overwhelmed me
with astonishment.
Your precocity anguishes me,
Who can set eyes on You and not breathe
in Your fragrance?
Even Your dribble causes onlookers to wonder,
and Your manifest form amazes rational beings.
Your tiny hands are clasped,
Your feet are kicking,
how lovely You are in every way.
Even Your mouth's murmur tells of Your Father.

21. How gorgeous is Your beauty, how sweet smell –
Your mouth is very honey,
O infant God!
The Power that proceeds from Your mouth
causes heavenly beings to tremble,
while Mary stands by
astonished at how all creation quakes at
Your mere nod.
You in Your grace provision both worlds,
and yet here You are sucking milk from her
whom You created;

22. Thanks be to You, O Son of God,
who has held me worthy
to sing the tale of your Nativity;
Have pity and forgive my shortcomings:
may I give thanks to You, Lord, and praise You.
for it is out of Your gift that I have
sung praise.
On the day of Your Nativity forgive our wrongs,
and may Your compassion bring healing to
our disfigured state.
May Your peace, Lord,
reign over Your people and Your Church.

And to You, Lord, be praise
on this Your feastday, O Child most glorious!

16

(Hymns on Mary, no. 11)

The wonders surrounding Mary and her child baffle the experts: the title 'Wonderful', given to the child by Isaiah, alone is appropriate.

For the reference in verse 6 to Mary's conception through her ear, see the Introduction. (At the end of the hymn the printed Syriac has a further two verses; since these clearly do not belong, they have not been included here).

1. The virgin daughter of David
has today invited me to a wedding feast.
With a love that is not inquisitive
come, let us take delight in her spread;
let us rejoice with her as we say,
"The Fruit to which she has given birth is God!".

Response: Blessed are You who have chosen Mary and greatly magnified her memory.

2. The virgin daughter of David
stands among the crowds who have gathered;
as she carries the Infant
the experts surround her,
one cross questioning her, another examining her:
for she is sealed, her virginity preserved.

3. She carries a Child,
yet her virginity remains;
while still a virgin, she gives to her offspring
the milk that all mothers give.
Who is sufficiently able,
who is there who dares to investigate this?

4. She carries an infant in her bosom,
yet her virginity's seal is preserved.

If anyone looks upon her
what can he say except
"Here is the Wonderful One", Is. 9:6
just as Isaiah spoke of old.

5. The glorious Isaiah
called Him 'God, the Valiant'; Is. 9:6
he called Him 'the Wonderful' too,
because of His astonishing birth.
For this reason let no one call Him
anything apart from 'the Wonderful'.

6. He entered by the ear
and resided in the womb in hidden fashion;
He then left the womb
without undoing her virginity's seal.
Likewise too when He left the tomb
He did so without undoing its seal. cp Mt. 27:66

7. Mary carried Him in honour
for nine months in her womb,
and when He sucked her milk
He too gave the drops of rain.
He is the prodigious wonder:
let the stance of all who deny Him be shattered!

8. Mary's breasts behaved like those
of any married mother:
she carried Fruit,
yet she had seen no marriage union.
Keep silence in awe, bold expert,
as you wonder at this girl in astonishment.

9. The chief of the angels
called Christ his 'Lord'; Lk. 1:28
and no human being
is head over the angels,
for it is God, and the Son of God
who is Gabriel's 'Lord'.

10. Who is He? Whose Son
is He who was born from a virgin?
He is God

from true God:
God above and Human below,
anathema upon him who investigates Him!

11. The peoples and all the nations
sang praise to Him
whom Mary bore:
He it is who bears up the heaven
and Him do the awesome Cherubim bless; Ez. 3:12
to Him do the Seraphim cry 'Holy'. Is. 6:3

17

(Hymns on Mary, no 12)

Mary's virginity is compared first to grapes which, though unpierced, give forth wine; then to the Rock in the Wilderness which miraculously provided the Israelites with water (Exodus 17, compare Numbers 20); and, finally, to the closed Temple door of Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 44:1-3): "No one shall enter it, for the Lord, the God of Israel, is going to enter by it".

1. Who will not wonder at Your nativity most glorious?
Conceived without marriage union, inexplicably born—
on high, without any mother; down below, without any Father.
Wondrous is Your nativity in every way!
Without virginity's seals being loosened or destroyed
Mary's breasts are filled with milk, so that she can give suck to the Provisioner of all.

Response: Praise to Him who was born from the Father eternally, and who, in His grace, was born in time.

2. Who is it who, seated amidst the vine, had sculpted grapes
without needing any craftsman's tool?
How is it that grapes conceive Him, the Wine, without any Father?
They bear the Son's symbol,
conceiving yet sealed, filled out without being pierced.
Let this suffice to rebute those who deny Him!

3. On Horeb the rock marked out your type, O Virgin, Ex. 17:6
for without having been pierced it gave birth
to provide drink for the Israelite camp which had
fainted and was close to death.
Your symbol attained to the rock and enriched it,
for it was from you that the Drink of heaven shone
forth,
and from it, through grace, the world drank and was
satisfied.
4. In a womb of flesh a marriage chamber was set out
in whose midst the heavenly Bridegroom lay
reclining,
while the virgin doors were carefully guarded. cp Ez. 44:2
When the glorious Groom desired to go forth
He left the virgin doors sleeping, unaware of His
departure
as the angels and watchers sang out in praise.

5. "Let all generations call me blessed" Lk. 1:48
said Mary as she exulted in joy,
'for I have become, through grace, a mother to God;
I have given birth, without intercourse,
to the Lamb of God, to the Lord of the angels,
– to judge by what that angel told me when he
announced this to me". Lk. 1:32-33

18

(Hymns on Mary, no. 13)

The poet addresses Mary directly, in awe and wonder.

1. O Virgin full of wonder
who bore for us the Son of God,
my feeble lips are inadequate
to tell of your purity.

Response: Blessed is your Child, O woman full of wonder?

2. It is a treasury full of every blessing,
overflowing with life for all who obtain it,
that you have transmitted to me in your virginity.
Who is able to acclaim you?

3. In lowly fashion there has shone forth from you
   the Exalted One who became in order to exalt,
   honour, and magnify the memory of you
   both here and in heaven above.

4. Today heaven and earth and all that is in them
   rejoice and exult
   as they throng together to raise up songs of praise,
   shouting out their acclamations.

5. The four-faced Cherubim
   are not so holy as you;
   the six-winged Seraphim
   are not more glorious than your beauty.

6. The legions of the Watchers on high
   do not surpass you in your purity
   as they carry in escort
   that fair Child from your womb.

19

(Hymns on Mary, no. 11)

The angel Gabriel's amazement at Mary serves as an example for human beings: they too should respond with wonder and love when contemplating the 'Coal of Fire' (see Isaiah 6:6) which Mary clasps in her hands. In verse 3 the poet addresses Christ as 'Rabuli', a term of endearment related to 'Rabboni' of the Gospels.

1. The Watcher beheld a virgin full of wonder
   and stood there in amazement.
   As though singing a love song he addressed her,
   "Peace to you, filled with grace! — Lk. 1:28
   The heaven is not greater than you,
   and the region of the Watchers trembles at your Child,
   for behold you are carrying Him in tranquillity
   –Him who gives life to the Watchers with his very breath."
   Because He so willed it, He has grown up on your milk.
   How astonishing are your fingers
   for they hold the Coal of Fire — cp Is. 6:6

while the strength of its flame lies still!
Blessed are you, O mother,
for what child is this to whom you have given birth?

Response: Blessed is your birth, O Lord of all,
for at it all creation has been illumined.

2. The mind has gone forth to gaze at Your nativity, Lord;
the understanding has made bold to look upon You,
but it is blinded by the encircling radiance
and overcome by the sea of fire,
for living fire surrounds You,
flames and lightnings serve there
as a fearsome warning against audacity.
A cloud of flame
and rays of bright fire
are an object of great awe, a voice saying
'The Son of God is not to be investigated.'

3. O child exalted beyond time,
grant that I may speak of Your birth,
for I am aware, Lord, that You cannot be comprehended
and that the telling of You is concealed in Your Being,
and Your full revelation lies in Your Godhead.
It is love which presses me to speak,
grant speech to this love, Rabbuli,
for I have not come here to pry into you.
Provide for love a song of praise,
so that love may adore You, without searching You out,
for it desires to extol you, and not to pry into You.
O Being who are hidden from all beings endowed with speech,
reveal to me some word so that I may address You.

4. The understanding gazes upon Him
in fervour of love
without being inquisitive;
it then presses on, wanting to enter and inspect Him,
but the legions of angels do not allow this
as their bands jostle one another,
for it is Gabriel and his companions who surround Him,
along with Michael's mighty crowd
who stand by in trembling and awe.
The fearsome Cherubim hide their faces,

the Seraphim beat with their wings,
and the heavenly hosts breath flame.
Who amidst all these would be so bold
to press his way in so as to look at the Son?

5. Love gives advice to the mind,
"Come, rest, weary one, from your exertions,
do not raise yourself up to the home of the fiery spirits,
for their companies will not allow you
to approach in the direction of the Hidden One.
Come, look at Mary who is carrying Him,
and Joseph as he embraces Him.
He is hidden in His Father from the spiritual beings,
but revealed in the virgin to the earth-born;
above He is hidden, but below revealed,
for He is one and the same, the Only Begotten."
Let wearisome enquiry find rest here,
for our Lord is revealed to the person who loves Him.

20

(Hymns on Mary, no. 15)

1. The Chariot of fire carries Him in awe, Ez. 1
yet feeble knees carried Him without getting burnt.
The Wheels of flame escort Him in awe,
yet in the tiny lap of David's daughter He is lovingly clasped.
The Cherubim carry Him and tremble,
the Seraphim cry 'Holy' and shrink back, Is. 6:3
yet Mary embraces Him at her breasts.

Response: In both height and depth have You resided, Lord,
in the womb of Your Begetter, in hidden fashion,
and Mary's bosom, made manifest.

2. Mary the faithful, blessed among women,
proffered Him milk from her breasts though still a virgin.
A marvel is this: who is capable to tell of how it took place?
A virgin has given birth, and her virginity remains;
she, a virgin, knelt down and gave birth,
she arose, and gave him milk, though still a virgin;
and when she died, her virginity still remained intact.

3. Mary has become, in type, the Orient with its luminaries,
   and from her womb there has shone out for us the
   Lord of Luminaries,
   who, at His Nativity, has chased darkness from the world
   and given light, with His rays, to peoples afar off; Lk. 2:32
   They brought along presents Mt. 2:11
   which they offered to Him in the manger at Bethlehem.
   Then, having worshipped Him, they returned back home.

4. Today let all creation thunder out in praise,
   let each mouth give a shout of 'glory',
   let tongues be stirred with a song of praise.
   let all the peoples cry out together in song.
   In heaven, praise to the Lord,
   and on earth, peace to all flesh,
   for a Saviour has shone forth for the world.

5. Today let Ezekiel, wondrous in his visions,
   rejoice, for his prophecy has found fulfilment in
   very fact:
   there, in Babylon, he beheld a closed door, Ez. 44:2
   and he said, "Let it remain sealed, for through it the
   Lord will enter".
   Mary is that door which is closed,
   and by it Christ has entered the world
   without ever opening it – so let the disputatious
   keep silent.

6. The mother who gave birth to Him is worthy to
   be remembered,
   the bosom which carried Him is worthy of blessing.
   Joseph, too, was through grace called 'father'
   to the True Son whose Father is most glorious.
   The Shepherd of all creation had been sent
   to the sheep which had strayed and got lost, cp Mt. 18:12
   He escorted them back again into His fold.

7. If someone is seeking You, where will he find You ?
   If someone has love for You, where will he see you?
   Should he seek for You in heaven, in the womb of
   Your Begetter,
   or may be in Ephrata, in the manger at Bethlehem ?
   Ps. 132:6, Lk. 2:7

And if he should seek You in Mary's womb,
You are kept hidden, under a seal.
Your Nativity is wondrous in every way!

21

(Hymns on Mary, no. 16)

After the opening verse, with its reference to the Annunciation, the poet addresses Mary directly. She replies in the final verse, alluding to a tradition about her childhood which is to be found in the Proto-Gospel of James, a non-canonical Gospel of the second century (a work also used in no. 47).

1. The blessed woman heard the salutation — Lk. 1:28
from the angel, and she conceived.
The disciples, too, in the Upper Room
rejoiced at the salutation. — Jn 20:19
Let your salutation be a butress of peace
to kings and priests in their towns;
preserve by your Cross the Church's children
so that they may sing praise to Your name with Hosannas.

Response: The memory of Mary lasts from generation to generation.

2. Blessed are you, O Mary, for in you there resided
the Holy Spirit of whom David sang.
Blessed are you who were held worthy to receive
the Father's salutation through Gabriel.
Blessed are you, for you have become, as it were, a chariot,
as your knees carried Him, as you held him in your arms;
your breasts were like fountains for Him
as you embraced Him who is clothed in flame.

3. Blessed are you, Mary, who became
the type of the bush which Moses beheld; — Ex. 3:2
blessed are you, Mary, who became
like a veil, covering His radiance; — cp Ex. 34:33

blessed are you, Mary, for from you there has
shone forth
the single Ray which hid the Sun's light:
of old it flashed out over Moses at the top of the
mountain,
but today, all the ends of the earth are filled with it.

4. Blessed are you, Mary, whom all the prophets
depicted in their writings;
blessed are you, Mary, whom Isaiah too
proclaimed in his prophecy:
"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and give birth — Is. 7:14
to a child whose name is Emmanuel".
And now all peoples cry out, "With us is He
who governs all by His will".

5. Blessed are you, Mary, who were called
a new kind of mother, in your virginity;
blessed are you, Mary, who were prefigured
under the likeness of the Earth which gave birth
to Adam — Gen. 2:7
– whereas you gave birth to the Lord of Adam.
Behold, the Word has overshadowed in your
pure womb — Lk. 1:35, Jn. 1:14
and He has depicted Himself in your womb.

6. Blessed are you, Mary, who became
a resplendent mother to the Lord of kings;
from you there has shone forth a Fruit,
glorious and much to be desired full of every beauty.
Blessed are you whose blessed state has found renown
in towns and communities,
for you have given birth to Christ, the Saviour of
the world
who has saved creation by His grace.

7. (Mary speaks) "When I was a child, the priests of the
Jewish people
brought me up in the holy Temple,
but now that I am a maiden
they have come and betrothed me to the just Joseph.
A man of fire came and gave me tidings,

he gave me a salutation – and I received conception. Lk. 1:28
I went and gave birth to Him in the manger at
Bethlehem,
and at His Nativity He has given joy to all creation".

22

(Soghitha 1)

In the course of this long and wide-ranging poem Mary is introduced as the speaker on two occasions (verses 4 and 8). This poem and no. 6 (Hymns on Mary 1) share a number of common themes, but it is not clear which borrows from which. Verses 24–26 are almost identical with the first three verses of no. 27 below. In the Syriac original the verses carry an alphabetic acrostic.

1. Stir up your strains, my lyre,
in praise of Mary the Virgin.
Raise aloft and sing out the tale,
full of wonder,
of this Virgin daughter of David,
who has given birth to Life for the world.

2. Whoever has love, will wonder at her,
while the inquisitive will be silenced in shame,
for we should not pry into the Mother
who has given birth in her virginity.
Since her case is far to exalted to expound,
let the disputatious not dare turn to her Son.

3. This Child played with the adder Is. 11:8
and crushed the accursed Snake,
thus healing Eve
of the poison she had met with
from the murderous Dragon
who, by his guile, had cast her into Sheol's midst.
4. "Like Mount Sinai, I received You
and was not burnt up by Your awesome Fire,
for You hid away Your Fire
lest it harm me,

and Your flame, upon which the Seraphs are unable
to gaze,
did not burn me up".

5. Though His true name goes back before time,
He was named 'Second Adam' cp 1 Cor. 15:45
since He resided in a womb
and became Man
from the daughter of David
without any seed or birth pangs – blessed is His name!

6. Gabriel had made ready a habitation
for his Lord when He was sent,
and there He mingled
the lowly and humble stock of humanity
with the stock of God
which is far exalted above all passions.

7. Mary too was wanting to learn
from the angel concerning her conception
which he had announced,
for she had heard novel words uttered in her ears;
but Gabriel held her back
from wearying herself wit prying into her Son.

8. "How can this be, Lk. 1:43
seeing that I have never known any man?
Conception and virginity are hard to find together –
this is something
which our human nature does not know,
nor has it provided a precedent among all the women
who have ever existed".

9. The Virgin imagined He would come into her womb
the way that other infants do;
she enquired of Him
after nature's well-trod path,
but He defined His own way at His birth,
having entered the womb without undoing her
virginity.

10. Mary had imagined that she would conceive
after the manifest ordering of ordinary reality,
but He left behind
that old way of birth
and came down to her by a new way
that neither nature nor intellect had anticipated.

11. At Mary's birth-giving, thanks to her Son,
that mother who had been cursed now received
blessing: Gen. 3:16
at His nativity He travelled
to the very depths where she was,
and He slew both Satan and Death,
the ones who had enslaved Adam, bringing him low.

12. In Mary's womb was that Infant
who from of old was on a par with His Father.
He has given us His greatness,
while He has acquired our feeble state:
He became mortal, along with us,
and has, there by, mingled His life among us, so
that we should not die.

13. The Adam from on high
has been manifested in a form
which resembles the first Adam in all things:
He has travelled in his footsteps-apart from his
having sinned;
this is why He was named 'Adam'
by Paul when he preached Him. 1 Cor. 15:45

14. When the first Adam was created
there was no need for marital union
and the pangs of birthgiving,
for God took a handful of dust Gen. 2:7
and formed Adam, all by Himself,
thereby manifesting His power and His wisdom.

15. It is evident that in the very same way
the Word became embodied from Mary the Virgin:
He did not reveal to a married pair
the mystery of His coming,

for He Himself became body, just as He willed it,
He became Man, and entered the world.

16. Mary is a Garden, upon which
the Rain of blessing descended from the Father;
she sprinkled some of its abundance
on the face of Adam
who revived and rose from the grave
where he had been hidden in Sheol by his enemies.

17. He has opened Himself up in love before me
as a great treasure store of instruction,
urging me to tell
of the history of David's daughter.
Come and take delight, all you who listen,
to this teaching which enriches all who embrace it.

18. This blessed teaching is at all times eager
that humanity should find true life,
and now it tells
concerning that pure Virgin
who has given birth to God in the flesh.
Come, all you peoples, let us listen in wonder to her story.

19. Her soul was filled with wonder
as she too spoke in wonder to her Child.
Her voice was discerning,
and spiritual were her feelings
as she uttered loving lullabies,
singing most beautifully.

20. This Virgin became a mother
while her seals were preserved unbroken;
she carries an infant in her womb
while remaining still a virgin.
She has become the Mother of God
as well as His handmaid and the work of His wisdom.

21. She who has given birth to the single Firstborn
has nursed both God and Adam!
She became mother

to that Hidden Child
who had been born perfect from His Father,
but who became an infant again in her womb.

22. The Tree of Life which sprang up — Gen. 2:9
in the midst of Paradise of old
never provided Adam with the fruit
that would have given him Life,
but now it has manifested itself in Mary's very bosom,
giving itself to Adam, who has thereby received Life.

23. From the supernal heights has the Lord, the Word,
flown down and descended
to reside in a young girl
who conceived Him and gave Him birth.
To tell of that pure woman is a task too exalted
for the lips of even the most eloquent.

24. Eve in Eden incurred
a vast document of debt — Col. 2:14
that her children would have to pay,
in the form of death, for all generations,
since the Serpent, that perverted scribe,
has written it out in his cunning, setting upon it his seal.

25. That Dragon of old looked on
as he multiplied that debt through his cunning:
the inexperienced Eve fell in love
with that cunning of his, for he had captivated her:
she listened to the perfidious creature
and so cast Adam down from his proper rank.

26. Eve by her wrongdoing incurred a debt
which continued right down to Mary,
so that the young girl might repay
the debts incurred by her mother,
and thanks to her the document would be torn up — Col. 2:14
which had roared out against all generations.

27 She carries Fire in her fingers,
she has embraced Flame in her arms;
at her breasts
she suckles Burning Fire,

giving milk to the Provisioner of all.
Who is capable of describing her?

28. Earth's two children have multiplied
the curses and thorns, which have brought it low: Gen. 3:18
on it they have introduced Death
to reside there and cause devastation.
But Mary's Child has filled all creation
with Life and peace.

29. Adam, the child of Earth, introduced
sickness and disease into the world,
opening up there a door for Death,
who then entered in and trampled it.
But Mary's Child, in His own person,
has carried off creation's diseases, thus reviving it.

30. Mary's virginity was preserved,
as was the Earth's, in Eden the blessed. cp Gen. 2:7
Without its having been worked,
there sprang up from its midst Gen. 2:9
the Tree of Life, which brings, in its mercies,
Life to the souls of all who taste of it.

31. For this wonder do not ask for some explanation
as you ponder on it, O wretched man;
do not chase in vain
after some natural course,
for it was by a course hidden from the intellect
that He entered and resided within that sealed womb.

32. It was not an ordinary human being she conceived,
such that her natural body would be aware of
at his entry:
up to the womb He was Fire and Spirit,
but in his mothers' womb
He became Man,
while remaining completely God.

33. It was not an ordinary human being
that Gabriel announced would enter the world,
for God the Word

sent him to Mary
in order to prepare for Himself an abode
wherein to reside and become fully embodied.

34. That miraculous conception had no need
of any marital union in bring it about,
for the very Creator of humanity
resided in the young girl,
making there for Himself a body and limbs,
seeing that He, as Lord of all, is able to do so.

35. Who has ever seen a child
who chose his own mother to give him birth,
sending message ahead to her
that he would come and reside in her?
And while she was pondering concerning His
conception
He entered and resided in her womb, without her
being aware of it.

36. And so it was that Mary received this Child
who is exalted above the reach of every mind.
She had learnt from the Watcher
that it was not the result of any marital union,
for the Holy Spirit and the Power of the
Most High — Lk. 1:35
had fashioned Him in the womb.

37. She is a pure spring which has never been mingled
with the flow of marital union,
for she received into her womb
that River of Life
which had flowed down in abundance on creation,
whereby all the dead have come to life.

38. She is the pure Temple wherein resided
God, the Hero of all ages. — Is. 9:6
In her there took place
a mystery most wonderful,
whereby God became Man,
and thus Adam too was called a 'son of the Father'.

39. In You, Lord, shall comfort be found
and encouragement for the pair who mourned over the Garden,
who stripped off their glory
and put on leaves instead; Gen. 3:7
for their sake You are now bound up in swaddling clothes Lk. 2:7
so that they might return back to the Garden.

40. Mary is that vine shoot which appeared
on blessed David's stock:
its branches burst forth with the Cluster Is. 65:8
bearing the Juice-Blood of Life:
Adam drank from its Wine,
was resurrected and returned back to Eden.

41. She is the beloved calf who has appeared
among blessed Abraham's sheep:
without bearing the yoke
of marital union
she knelt down and gave birth to God
who in His love has become Man so as to save us.

42. This is why it was not a case of marital union
when Adam and Eve were created–
nor was there any need for it to be present
in the case of our Lord,
for He, being God, created Adam,
and at the end He Himself became Man.

43. You gave orders to water and to dust
and they gave birth to the species You formed with them. Gen. 2:7
The foolish have held on to this
without asking further,
and they have stirred up their intellect in enquiry
as they pry into Your own birth which cannot be comprehended.

44. Listen to the blessings He received in the Chariot Ez. 1
to the lullabies which His virgin mother sang.
In the Chariot lies His might,

in Mary His love.
The Chariot in awe cries 'blessed', Ez. 3:12
whereas the girl who is His mother caresses Him.

45. A Life-giving cry shall be sent by You,
O Exalted one, into the house of the dead,
addressed to Eve
in that abode of the buried,
saying "Your daughter has given birth,
while remaining a virgin, to a child who will repay your debt".

46. The Great One was in the young girl's womb
without her being aware of His moving about there;
the seals were in place over her womb,
yet He was already residing within it.
She was waiting for Him to come to her,
but He in innocence had already entered her womb.

47. How great a thing it is that the Ancient of Days
should dwell as a babe in a womb!
There is Fire, too, dwelling there
in that womb of flesh,
and He who is from eternity
has effecting a new beginning – and been conceived!

48. Praise to the Infant who had previously
fashioned His own mother in a womb,
and then turned around and become
an infant in her, younger than her.
He is far more ancient than His mother,
but also younger than her – for such was His will!

49. Thanks be to that Ocean of wisdom
who entered and dwelt in the Virgin's womb.
Though heights and depths
are full of His majesty,
yet the womb of David's daughter has contained Him,
and small though she is, she embraces Him in her arms.

50. Two mothers have made their appearance,
giving birth to two quite different children:

the one gave birth to Adam –
who filled her with curses,
whereas Mary has given birth to God –
who as filled all creation with His blessing.

51, Blessed are you, O Mary, daughter of David,
and blessed is the Fruit whom you have given us.
Blessed is the Father who has sent
His Son for our salvation,
and blessed is the Paraclete Spirit
who has taught us His mystery – blessed be His name!.

23

(Soghitha 2)

After a short introduction the poet imagines what sort of words Mary might have used as she sang to the child in her arms. In the second half of the poem (verse 19 onwards) Mary recalls her ancestor Eve: together with Adam, she can now pick the Fruit of Life and thus they can recover the garments of glory that they had lost at the Fall.

1. I was full of wonder at Mary as she gave suck
to the Provisioner of all races who had become an infant.
He of whom all worlds are full
has resided in a young girl's womb!

2. The daughter of poor parents has become mother to
the Rich one
whose love has thus constrained Him.
He was Fire in the virgin's womb,
yet she was not burnt up by his flames.

3. Lovingly she embraced the Burning Coal,
yet she suffered no harm as she held Him in honour.
Burning Fire has become embodied
and is clasped by Mary's hands!

4. The great Sun has gathered in His rays
behind a single luminous cloud;

a young girl has become mother
to Him who had given birth to Adam-and to the whole world.

5. As she cuddled Him
she sang lullabies with loving words;
she worshipped her child and said,
"Allow me, dear Lord, to embrace You".

6. "Since You are my son, I will sing to You;
since I have become Your mother, I will honour You.
I gave birth to You, my Son, yet You are far older than I;
I carry You, the Lord who carries me!

7. "My mind is distracted in awe at You;
gather my thoughts so that I may praise You.
I wonder at how still You are,
for within You lies thunder concealed.

8. "You shone forth from me as a babe,
yet You are strong as a hero:
rightly did Isaiah proclaim
and call You "Wonder." Is.9:6

9. "You are here wholly with me:
Your whole self lies hidden within Your child's body.
All heights are filled with You,
yet my breast is not too small for You.

10. "Your abode is both in me and in the heaven;
like it, Lord, I will give praise.
The denizens of the heights shall wonder at me,
all calling me blessed. Lk. 1:48

11. "Heaven will herself carry me lovingly,
for I have received honour great than hers;
she never became Your mother–
instead You made her Your throne.

12. "How much more honoured and glorious
is a king's mother than his throne!

I will give thanks to You, Lord,
for being willing that I should sing to You as
Your mother.

13. "O Mighty One who carries the earth,
yet who willed that I carry You: praise to You.
O Rich One who became son
to the daughter of poor parents, praise to You.

14. "O Ancient One who came to me as a babe,
I magnify You.
You rest on my knees, yet upon You
depend both heights and depths–indeed, all worlds.

15. "You clasp at my breast– yet in your control
are lands, seas and all that is in them;
Your chariot is on high, aloft,
yet I carry You, and You rest on me.

16. "While You are with me,
all the hosts of angels worship You:
while You lie cuddled in my arms,
You are escorted by angels.

17. "Heaven is full of You above,
yet my lap bears You here below;
on high You reside amidst fire,
yet do not burn up those below.

18. "The seraphs laud You with their cries of
'Holy', Is.6:3
so how can I sing to You, Lord?
The cherubim in awe cry 'Blessed' to You Ez.3:12
so how are You honoured by my songs?

19. "Let Eve, our aged mother, now hear
and come as I speak;
let her head, once bowed in her naked state
in the Garden, be raised up.

20. "Let her reveal her face and sing to You,
for shamefacedness has passed away in You;

let her hear the message full of peace.
for her daughter has repaid her debt.

21. "The serpent that led her astray is trampled down
in You, the Root that has shone forth from my
womb.
The cherub and the sword are routed by You, Gen.3:24
and Adam, who was driven out, shall return.

22. "Eve and Adam shall seek refuge in You
and from me they shall pluck the Fruit of Life.
In You their palates shall find sweetness
in place of that fruit that proved so bitter.

23. "The banished servants shall return in You
to that inheritance from which they had departed.
You shall be for them a garment of glory
with which they shall cover their naked condition.

24. "You shall shine out in Sheol over their dejected state
and chase away from them their darkness.
O Aged Child, who has shone out in me,
in You shall all young infants be blessed.

25. "In You shall Sheol's prisoners come forth,
in You, too, shall the dark be illumined;
the poor, O Lord, shall be enriched in You,
and the needy, too, shall find abundance.

26. In You all the hungry shall have their fill,
and at Your voice the dead shall be resurrected.
Heaven and earth shall thunder out for You;
Blessed is He who sent You, the Lord of all".

24

(Soghitha 3)

The setting of this poem is no longer the Nativity. The Soghitha bears the title 'On Simeon the Old Man' and it deals with the Presentation in the Temple (Luke 2:22–35). In verse 12 onwards the poet makes use of a Syriac tradition concerning

Simeon which takes its origin from Luke 2:26 ("... he would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Christ") and the opening words of Luke 2:29 ("Let your servant go..."). From these two passages it was assumed that Simeon had been 'bound' (asir, so verse 15) in life, and so he is sometimes referred to as Simeon the Bound (asira) and assumed to have been 'many generations old' (verse 22, in the final text in this collection, no. 47, he is five hundred years old!). Because of the similarity between asire and Sira, Simeon was sometimes further identified as the father of Jesus ben Sira, the author of Ecclesiasticus.

1. A Virgin most pure
has invited me today to speak of her.
Come, enter and find delight,
young friends of the Bridechamber,
in the spiritual spread
which the Virgin has made for the guests.

Response: Blessed be Christ, whom Simeon, in his love,
carried in his arms. Lk. 2:28

2. The Sun Ray which illumines the world
has shone out from a mother, because He so willed it.
He has stirred forth from her –
and delivered all creation!
At His birth He has chased shadows away,
as He shone forth, darkness is dissipated.

3. Mary carried the Child who, in His wisdom,
had caused Adam to be born.
He was nurtured by her milk,
He was cuddled in her bosom;
She supports Him in her arms,
whereas He supports the world by His bidding.

4. The Virgin received revelation concerning Him
when He went forth to visit both worlds:
instead of the Chariot,
with its eloquent wheels, Ez. 1
His wish was for the Virgin to escort Him.
Who is sufficiently able to tell of her?

5. She took Him up to the sacred Temple — Lk. 2:22–24
to appear there in His Father's House, along with
the offerings,
to offer up sacrifices in fulfilment of the Law
so that in every respect
He might resemble other children
among whom He was mingled.

6. He was with His Father on Mount Sinai
when He gave the Law to the people.
He who received
the propitiatory sacrifices
is here carried by a young girl
who makes offerings on His behalf!

7. He accepts sacrifices from Levi
and offerings from all the priests –
but now He Himself offers sacrifices
and makes requests:
young doves and wheat flour — cp Lk. 2:24
as a purificatory offering to go on the altar.

8. From Noah He received offerings, — Gen 8:20–21
He was revealed to Abraham in the offerings, — Gen. 15:12ff
to Isaac, on the pyre, — cp Gen. 22:13
to Jacob, on the ladder. — Gen. 28:12
In His love He granted forgiveness to those of old,
while in latter days His own offering is selected.

9. It was He who received Abel's firstling lamb, — Gen. 4:4
He, too, rejected Cain who had failed
to act pleasingly. — Gen. 4:5
Melkizedek the Great officiated as priest, — Gen. 14:18
serving as His type,
but now Joseph takes Him up to the Temple
along with tithes and wheat flour.

10. He manifested His day to Abraham — cp Jn 8:56,
being seen in the tree and the ram; — Gen. 22:13
He gave to Eliezer the priestly robe — Ex. 28:1
and the stone of Perfection; — Ex. 28:30

but now with other children
He brings to the altar a purificatory gift.

11. Simeon the ancient old man
beheld a wonder, and was fervent in love:
he carried the Child, adoring Him in wonder,
he proffered to Him a request, saying,
"Now that I have seen You, my Lord, Lk. 2:29
may I go to my rest".

12. Simeon had been bound in the Spirit Lk. 2:25–26
and was awaiting the Messiah in the Temple.
In a magnificent revelation
he found himself beholding his Lord;
when the Child appeared
the old man became fervent, and supplicated Him in love.

13. That Child to whom the Virgin gave birth
had bound him with a thread of life:
a long time beforehand
He had given him the promise
that "until you see me as a child, cp Lk. 2:26
you will not be released from the world."

14. The years and the generations passed by,
and the promise remained just the word;
the ancient old man was held bound,
awaiting in expectation.
But then the day of revelation arrived,
the day he had yearned for, and he asked to be released.

15. "My eyes have seen Your compassion: Lk. 2:29
in accordance with the agreement You made, release me, Lord.
You bound me and left me thus,
You held me in honour for a long while.
Release me from life, now that I have seen You,
for this was why I was bound – so that I might receive You.

16. "Release me, Lord, so that I may rest in the dust
–and proclaim to all those who lie buried
that he who releases the bound,
He who is Lord,

has brought good news for you, the dead,
for He who will raise you all is close at hand.

17. "Release me, for it was You, O Son of the Living One, who bound me,
leaving me to behold You in this world.
Now that I have seen Your revelation
and have been enhanced by the sight of You,
let me depart and rest among the dead,
so that I may preach the good news to them all."

18. A great wonder for all the discerning,
but for pagans and Jews a matter for shame,
seeing that an aged old man
was begging an infant Child,
"Release me from life."
For it was He who had bound him – and He can easily release him.

19. Simeon carries Him upon his arms,
whereas the Seraph and the Angel needed tongs. Is. 6:6
For the Church this is a moment of pride,
for the Synagogue, a stumbling block;
the latter, who hates the light, just mocks,
whereas the Daughter of light rejoices at his humility.

20. Come, O companion of Judas,
who fail to acknowledge that God has been born:
whom was it that Simeon besought
to release him from life,
if not the Lord of spirits,
who is God, but has appeared as Man?

21. Who is this Child
whom the priest is carrying in his arms,
making supplication before him,
in petition,
as he confesses in love that this is He who had bound him,
and in love begs Him to release him?

22. Who is this man, the son many generations old,
who asks the Son of a single day to be released?

Had the old man not really been
younger than the boy
he would not have been asking
to be released from the weight of old age.

23. That blessed old man made request cp Lk. 2:29
to Him who was wrapped up in swaddling clothes,
for he had learnt who He was,
and knew that it was He who had bound him,
and so he begged Him, seeing that He had existed
before both Adam and the sun.

24. Had he not realized
that He had authority over all generations,
and that it was easy for Him
to bind and to loose the whole world,
he would not have made request to Him
to release him from the heavy burden of age so
that he might have rest.

25. He recognized the Child
through a revelation of the Spirit, in stillness; Lk. 2:27
and once he had seen Him he no longer held out
in making intercession,
but raised his voice to confess
that this Child is God who has appeared as Man.

26. Let the Mediator come and hear
the request of that glorious old man
as he bows his head
and worships
the Infant who has been placed in his hands,
asking Him to fulfil his need in love.

27. "Now that I have seen Your compassion
please release me", Simeon was asking;
and through his acknowledgement
he bore witness to the Child,
that compassion and blessing are His,
and through His compassion He brings forgiveness
to all flesh.

28. The old man bowed down before the Infant
and his many years bore testimony
to the Infant, that in very truth
He is the Ancient of Days,
concerning whom David gives testimony,
"You, O Child, have existed from the beginning". Ps. 110:3

29. That sage old man
who carried Him in his arms in the Temple
gazed on the Child
and recognized that He is the Ancient One,
and so begged Him, as the Ancient of Days,
to release him in love.

30. The son of Jesse called Him 'Child', Ps. 110:3
for he perceived He would appear as a child.
At His first birth
He was not younger than His Father,
but because He would come to second birth
David called 'Child' Him who had been born
from the beginning. Ps. 110:3

31. Mary heard the request
that the old man had been stirred by the Spirit
to make,
and she rejoiced;
eagerly she approached and addressed him,
"Speak, aged old man,
for your word's taste is like honey.

32. "Raise your voice, ancient man,
so that creation's mothers may hear
how you are witness with your request
to my virginity,
how the Good one has shone forth,
outside the marital union, to bring salvation
to the world.

33. "Raise your gentle voice,
strike your lyre's strings so that they sing out,
and through your sweet song
give comfort to my saddened state,

for my own people are reviling me:
with your song rebuke those who hate me

34. "How fair is the sound of your request,
speak on, so that all creation my hear;
let it be a true witness
to my virginity,
testifying that He who has come down
to deliver both worlds was born of a virgin".

35. How fair was the converse
between the young girl and this honoured
old man;
they became by their very words
witnesses to these novel events,
for they knew who He was, and whose Son,
and they spoke about Him in love.

36. Mary the blessed Field, has produced
that Sheaf that brings all kinds of joy:
the Harvest Pile of corn
needed no farmer.
Simeon carried in his own arms
blessings which he proffered to the world.

37. Both parties had pride
in that Fruit to whom the Virgin had given birth –
the young girl who had born Him
and the old man who had yearned for Him.
Heaven and earth rejoice in Him,
the Mediator who brought peace to both worlds.

38. The Temple and its Sanctuary
rejoiced in Him, Lord of priests,
who brought offerings
– and received supplication:
along with Joseph He brought sacrifices,
while with His hyssop He renders both
worlds pure. Ps. 51:7

39. Simeon carried with his hands that
Grape-Cluster of Life, Is. 65:8

receiving Him from the virgin Vine;
he brought Him, with all His blessings,
into the place of propitiation:
the entire Sanctuary rejoiced at Him,
the Child who had been sent from the Father.

40. The Virgin exulted, for she had given Him birth,
so did the old man, because he was released
at His manifestation.
The Ark felt yearning for Him
as He visited it with the offerings,
heaven and earth, and all that is in them,
became exultant in praise for Him at His birth.

25

(Hymns on Mary, second series, no. 1)

The setting returns to the Annunciation. So awesome is the angel's message (here described as a 'letter') that Mary is at first perturbed, and she questions 'the man of fire' closely. The poem concludes with the angel's assurance to her that it is the Holy Spirit who will come to her.

1. The Father wrote a letter
and sent it, at the hands of a Watcher,
to Nazareth,
to a virgin, Mary, in whom He was pleased
and so chose her to become
mother to His Only-Begotten
when He descended to deliver all worlds.

Response: Blessed is that mouth which announced to Mary.

2. From amidst the fiery legions,
from the thousands and myriads who stand ready,
from the choirs of fire, the ranks of flame,
was Gabriel sent — Lk. 1:26
to the Virgin, to announce that she would conceive.

3. God gave Gabriel the command
and he flew down amidst great commotion,
bearing that letter full of fair tidings,
to bring peace to those in a state of wrath,
seeing that reconciliation had taken place
between God and the world.

4. The messenger learnt the secret
and fluttered down, arriving at Nazareth.
As he beheld the Virgin, he bowed down in worship.
then stretched out his hand and gave her the letter
of peace that had been sent from above.

5. "Peace be with you, O Daughter of humanity,
for you have been chosen to become the tabernacle
to the Lord of Majesty who is coming down
from on high
to visit the depth below
and to raise Adam up to the Garden.

6. "Salutation to you, filled with grace, Lk. 1:28
my Lord is with you, O Palace of the Most High,
for in you will the King reside, and in you
shall the Light shine out.
From you there shall come forth into creation
that Hero who will deliver the world".

7. The maiden heard this salutation
from the man of fire who announced it;
her senses were perturbed, her thoughts
were dismayed,
she stood there in amazement,
and said secretly to herself:

8. "Whence comes this man of fire?
Why should a spiritual being come to me?
Who is he? To what place does he belong?
Who is his 'Lord', that he said to me Lk. 1:28
'My Lord is with you'? He has upset and
perturbed me".

9. The Watcher spoke to the maiden,
"Do not be upset, Mary; salutation to you,
for you will conceive and give birth to
the Wonderful; Is. 9:6
from your womb the Sun shall shine forth,
and He will drive out the world's darkness".

10. Mary says to the angel, cp Lk. 1:34
"Explain to me, O fiery being, what you mean.
Your appearance is weighty, your raiment
is of flame,
your lips are fire as they utter.
Who is able to speak with you?

11. "Your exalted manner of speech belongs elsewhere,
why do you speak like us and with us?
Your appearance is exalted and not of this earth;
if there is some race of fiery beings
then it is to it that you belong, O fearsome hero.

12. "O offspring of flame, explain to me
the manner concerning which you speak,
for you have announced a birth – yet
I have known no man.
Your message is fearsome, like yourself:
your voice and your words are just like
your appearance.

13. "How can there be conception without a man?
How can a virgin give birth?
Who has ever beheld a crop without any seed?
Explain to me what it is you are saying,
how all this can possibly take place".

14. The Watcher replied, "It is the Holy Spirit
who will come to you and make holy your womb;
then the Power of the Most High shall
descend and reside in you;
from your womb shall Riches shine out
– to pay all the debts of the world".

26

(Hymns on Mary, second series, no. 2)

The Fall, brought about by the serpent's cunning persuasion, has resulted in a state of anger and hostility between Adam/humanity and God: the anger is resentment on Adam's part, and God from the outset wishes to effect a reconciliation; this He does by means of the angel Gabriel and Mary, with the result that it is Mary who repays the debt (cp Colossians 2:14) incurred by Eve and Adam.

1. At the snake's persuasion
   Adam incurred a debt to Justice,
   and the demand for repayment passed on to all generations.
   The Angel and the Maiden met together, — Lk. 1:28ff
   and, having conferred and heard one another, they repaid the debt.

2. The serpent was the cause of contention
   between Adam and God in the Garden;
   the servant was brought low, and ended up subject to corruption,
   but his merciful Lord wished
   to reconcile enangered Adam and raise him up again.

3. God interposed
   an angel and a maiden to confer
   in order that they might reverse this state of affairs
   and a reconciliation be effected between beings above and those below,
   and the document of debts be wiped out. — Col. 2:14

4. By the eternal design
   that God had from the very beginning
   He wished to effect peace, to forgive the sin,
   and find reconciliation with banished Adam,
   returning him in compassion to Eden.

5. From those above, a Watcher,
   from the race of those below, a virgin:

two people, one from each side, were entrusted
with this Mystery that was to be uttered,
in order that between them they might achieve
reconciliation.

6. The angel descended from on high
and with him the virgin had conversation:
the business of reconciliation was broached,
and an agreement of peace was reached,
so that those banished might return to the Garden.

7. Mary stood there and received
the messenger sent from on high:
she listened to his words and spoke with him.
So, through her, there came remission
for all peoples and races.

8. From among those below it was not a male
who was appointed to repay the debt,
but a female, one chosen from among women.
She listened, spoke and established something
quite new,
thus gaining renown in the world.

9. Instead of the serpent, there stood Gabriel,
instead of Eve, Mary the Virgin.
On that first occasion it was not a man who spoke,
and because of this no male
was appointed to repay the debt.

10. Eve had incurred a debt to God,
she had listened to the snake's advice:
a young girl – only one day old – she had
spurned God's command,
and for this very reason it was through a young
girl
that salvation was sent to the world.

11. That utterance which the accursed Murderer — cp Jn. 8:44
had brought about with respect of Eve,
was dissolved by Gabriel in the words he spoke
to Mary.

Eve wrote out the document of debt, Col. 2:14
but the Virgin repaid that debt.

12. That wall built up of anger, vp Eph. 2:14
which the Accursed One had built in the Garden,
was torn down by Gabriel, when he descended
to earth,
for he was the messenger of peace
who had been sent to pacify the world.

13. Gabriel stood there in the midst,
bearing the Mystery between the Father and
Mary the Virgin.
One from on high, one from below –
and an agreement of peace was reached
with the effect that those below became mingled
with those above.

14. The daughter, filled with grace,
stood there instead of her mother at this
crisis point:
because Eve had fallen, Mary raised her up,
and so there was hope for the banished:
having been reconciled, they could return to Eden.

15. Sorrows have been exchanged,
for joys that have occurred for the world.
Evil times have passed away, good days have come,
for Riches have come down from on high,
and through this the world's debts have been paid.

16. God has sent hope of salvation
to provide rest for the world,
liberating Adam from the land of thorns Gen. 3:18
removing from him all sorrows.
Blessed is He who has shone out and redeemed the
world!

27

(Hymns on Mary, second series, no. 3)

The hymn continues with the theme of the documents of debt incurred by Adam and Eve, and how it was repaid. Since Eve listened to the serpent, who was thus enabled to pour poison into her ear, it was appropriate that in the case of Mary, who listened to the angel's message, the divine Word of the Father should also be described as entering by her ear.

Unlike Eve, Mary did not accept the angel's words blindly, and it is only the angel's mention of the Holy Spirit that finally reassures her. Thus, thanks to Mary, Paradise is opened up – this time with access to the Tree of Life which, in its desire to give itself to humanity, has now sprung up from her on earth. In this way the cherub's sword, which had hitherto kept humanity away from Paradise, is now removed.

1. In Eden Eve wrote out
   a mighty document of debt, Col. 2:14
   with the result that her children lamented,
   for it brought death to generation after generation.
   The serpent, that perverse scribe,
   in his guile wrote, signed and sealed it.

2. That primordial dragon
   by his counsel made the debt vast
   for the race that fell in love with the Captivator's company;
   by listening to the dragon
   it caused Adam to leave the Garden.

3. Eve's sin contracted the debt
   which was held in reserve for Mary,
   so that the young girl might repay her mother's debt,
   and thanks to her that document would be torn up Col. 2:14
   which had cried out against all generations.

4. The serpent, with venemous intention,
   breathed poison in the ears of weak Eve –
   this passed on, with murderous effect, flying from generation to generation.

until there came forth from Mary
the Infant who slew that snake.

5. The Word of the Father made His descent down
to the ear by which misfortune had entered in:
He had watched the serpent's tracks, and following up
its traces,
washed away the dragon's poison
from the ear of the chaste Virgin by His hovering
descent.

6. For the snake's insinuation which had wrought
destruction
had entered in by the ear;
thus by the gate through which death had come,
Life should enter in,
and there, in the very place of the sin,
grace, which has come to reign, should abound. cp Rom. 5:20

7. The Father has sent Gabriel Lk. 1:26
as trusty messenger for the word:
His purpose was to bring the young girl a greeting
that would give joy to all,
and bring to an end that contentious state
which the Accursed One had introduced in the Garden.

8. Down flew that spiritual being:
on reaching Mary, he bowed down and made his
announcement;
he opened his mouth, and sowed the salutation in her
ears, to her joy; Lk. 1:28
he brought out and gave to her the missive
which God had sent her concerning His son.

9. A hidden mystery belonging to God
came out into the open by means of the Watcher who
had been sent:
in the New Proclamation, through the mouth of the
fiery being,
through the tongue of flame,
hidden things were uttered.

10. That chief of all the angels
gave salutation to the young girl,
for the Father, reconciled with the race of Adam,
had sent His beloved Son
to appear from a womb, in human form.

11. "Peace be with you, O Daughter of humanity,
for you have been chosen by God as a bride,
so that you may become – in your virginity – mother
to His beloved,
and give birth to the Ancient of Days
who will repair the damage done to the world.

12. "Salutation to you, filled with grace, Lk. 1:28
my Lord is with you, O blessed among women. cp. Lk. 1:42
In you shall the King, the Lord of angels, reside,
and from you there shall shine forth the Saviour
for all creation and all generations".

13. To which Mary then says, "How can his birth Lk. 1:34
take place without a man on the scene?
You have announced to me a child – show me his father.
I am a virgin, and without blame:
no man has ever known me.

14. "How can a field that has never been sown
look to piles of corn?
You have announced to me produce
– but who is the husbandman? For how can I expect
any produce to come without any seed being sown?"

15. The Watcher replied, "Mary, keep silent,
for your Husbandman needs no seed:
He will come down and sow Himself in your womb;
He will sprout forth from you like grass, cp. Ps. 72:16
and assuage the whole world's hunger.

16. "The great book of Genesis
can teach you how you will give birth:
just as Adam gave birth to Eve without intercourse,
Gen. 2:22
so too from you there shall appear a Saviour
for creation, without there being any man.

17. "The Holy Spirit shall be with you; Lk. 1:35
He will hover over your womb and sanctify it;
then the Power of the Most High will descend and
overshadow in you
– and a Child shall come forth from you
who will trample down the head of the snake". cp Ps.74:14

18. It was appropriate for Gabriel
to stand there between the Father and the World,
undoing the words of that primordial serpent
and revealing His mystery that would prove true
– instead of the serpent's cunning which had deceived
that former woman. Gen. 3:1

19. The young girl said to the angel,
"Here I am, the handmade of the Lord: Lk. 1:38
the Creator has authority to reside in His creation,
and it is good that the Fashioner, in His compassion,
should visit what He has fashioned".

20. The serpent and Eve had dug a grave
for Adam, condemning him to Sheol.
Along came Gabriel, speaking with Mary,
and from this a mystery shone forth
that brings resurrection to all who lie buried.

21. Adam's virgin wife accepted
the Liar who deceived her by his guile: Gen. 3:1–7
she listened – perversely; she believed – stupidly;
and she provided Adam with nakedness
by means of that bitter fruit in the Garden.

22. Along came Mary, the daughter of David,
and she accepted the Watcher's salutation.
She wove a robe of glory,
providing it as a garment for Adam's naked state:
the bridegroom now stood resplendent in his bridal chamber.

23. There were two virgins,
but the actions of the two were quite different:
one brought down her husband, the other gave
support to her father

for in Eve Adam found a grave,
but in Mary he was invited to heaven!

24. Two messengers were sent
to the world–Satan and the angel:
the serpent to Eve, and Gabriel to Mary.
In the message of each
the possibility of both death and life was to be found.

25. That wise Planter of the Garden
planted two Trees in Eden,
hanging Death on the one, hiding Life on the other.
He thus brought Adam to a contest,
so that from the struggle he might emerge with a crown.

26. God imposed on him there a law, — Gen. 3:3
bidding him not to eat
of the fruit of knowledge, for in it death resided.
The serpent and Eve forged a secret pact together
and so caused the warrior to slip and fall in the struggle.

27. An offshoot appeared, Mary the Virgin,
and in her God came down and suspended a Fruit
In Eden they never tasted it, but from Mary they plucked it
– that Fruit which gives strength to those who eat of it
as it offers itself to them in its love.

28. The Tree burned in its love
for those who should have eaten of it–but they abandoned it in Eden.
In order to put to shame the serpent who had deprived them of it
the Tree left and followed them in its great concern,
so that they might eat of it there, in their own place!

29. Lust and desire for power
were in the Tree of Knowledge,

but the Virgin conceived a Fruit without lust
so that the lust which led to death for Adam's race
might in her be rendered ineffective for all generations.

30. Mary is God's very Eden:
no Tree of Knowledge is in her,
nor any serpent to deceive, or Eve to bring death.
From her Tree of Life has shone forth
which will bring back the banished exiles to Eden.

31. That Tree which had been guarded
by the Cherub and the sharp sword of flame — Gen. 3:24
now resides in the Pure Girl – and it is Joseph
who guards her,
protecting the young girl from the calumnies
of those Jews who imagined that he himself was
that Tree's father.

32. The guardian Cherub has laid down his sword,
for that Fruit he was guarding has been sent
from the great heights to the depths where fallen
humanity lives:
mortals have eaten of it and found life.
Blessed is that Fruit to which the Virgin Mary has
given birth!

28

(Hymns on Mary, no. 6, in British Library manuscript Add. 14520)

Mary herself is described here as 'a letter full of secrets, (or, 'of mysteries, symbols'), and through her ear Life enters in' to provide healing for the fallen world.

1. Mary became like a letter, full of secrets:
the Word entered and dwelt in the pure girl,
without intercourse she became pregnant
and from her shone forth the great Light in the
world.

Response: Blessed is He who shone forth from David's daughter so as to give freedom to all.

2. Through Mary's ear did the road travel by which
   Life entered in,
   destroying the serpent's footprints;
   it shone out with the teaching of truth
   and all that had been corrupted of old was restored.

3. The angel and Mary set aright that episode
   by the Tree of Knowledge when words
   of falsehood and rebellion were uttered.
   With the angel and Mary was all falsehood put to
   shame.

4. A single daughter of Man, full of wonder and glorious,
   heard the secret from the angel
   and gave forth fruit that Adam might eat;
   he ate – and overcame that secret death that had
   slain him.

5. In place of the Tree of Knowledge, full of death,
   Mary became for us a tree of life,
   bearing a Fruit that dissolved that death,
   giving life to humanity through its being eaten.

6. The young maid gave healing medicine to her aged
   mother, bitten by the serpent;
   the bitter poison was quenched from her limbs
   and the death that had slain her proved no longer
   effective:
   daughter had acted as physician to her mother, and
   healed her.

7. Mary's bosom is like the cloud over mount Sinai — Ex. 19:16
   wherein resided the Lord of the heights:
   a great wonder it was, for the mountain shook,
   whereas Mary's bosom did not stir at all.

8. The seraph, duly veiled, cries 'holy' in great awe, — Is. 6:3
   whereas Mary bears the very Flame,
   carrying Him in her bosom:
   that she was not burnt is a matter of utter
   astonishment.

29

(Hymns on Mary, no. 16, in British Library manuscript Add. 14520)

Mary is here depicted as a chariot, using the imagery of Ezekiel's great vision (Ezekiel 1).

1. A chariot of flesh did Mary become
enabling her to escort the Fiery One in her bosom.
The angel stood amazed at the daughter of humanity
as she carried the Lord of all humanity.

2. The very chief of the angels prostrated before her
as he gave her the salutation in serenity:
he clasped his hands, holding her purity in honour,
aware that his Lord to reside in her.

3. Gabriel honoured her, for he knew
whose son, and who it was, she was carrying;
he gave her the salutation, worshipped and uttered praise
to the Gentle One who had chosen her to His honour.

4. An orphaned girl has become the very heaven
and supernal beings stand in awe at the daughter of Man.
Heaven was too small for Him who descended
and resided within her, so as to save all creation.

5. She carried in honour the Lord of supernal beings,
she lovingly embraced the Hope of those below,
she delighted to lift Him up and sing
as she willed to the Fashioner of infants.

6. Had there existed envy in heaven
Ezekiel's chariot would have envied the daughter of Man: Ez. 1
the chariot conveyed the likeness of his glory,
whereas she carried the reality of His majesty!

7. The chariot was harnessed with fire,
its rider was girded in flashes of lightning;
now a lesser flame honours Him
as He lies wrapped in swaddling clothes to make us pure.

8. The cherubim are not aware of the likeness
of the Exalted One who rests on their backs:
they carry Him, yet He is distanced from them.
Blessed is that Power which carries those who
carry him!

30

(Hymns on Mary, no. 17, in British Library manuscript
Add. 14520)

The poet describes the wonders of Mary's birthgiving, introducing a variety of types and symbols from the Old Testament.

1. Your birth is a source of wonder, O Saviour of all,
who is capable of relating it?
A virgin conceived You, a novel sight!
Without intercourse she received You,
knowing no man, her womb was filled!
What a source for distraction is this spotless girl
who gave birth, not having been known by any man;
a great wonder is this for anyone to see,
a virgin who gives birth, yet she remains sealed;
milk flows in her breasts
while her virginity is still preserved.
How great is your tale, O Virgin full of wonder,
blessed is He who shone forth from your fair beauty.

2. In the wilderness the rock gave birth Ex. 17:6
to water so that a great people might drink,
to a fountain which gushed forth rivers.
It was a staff which breached it, acting as a symbol,
pouring forth for the people to drink.
Much more than this rock has the virgin,
by giving birth,
poured forth living waters –
a fountain from which the thirsty land of
humanity cp Is. 41:18
has slaked its thirst;
a draft which has flowed from the Father
at which all creation rejoices.
Blessed is your child, O blessed virgin,
for he is resplendent in every generation.

3. Moses spoke with the rock
and it produced water in streams, but no
flood; cp Ps. 78:16
the well which the people's leaders indicated
was opened by a staff, bearer of symbols;
for the thirsty its draft was sweet.
By David's daughter did Gabriel take his stand:
with her there spoke this spiritual being
as with the rock Moses had done of old.
She then conceived and gave birth in her virginity
to Him in whose symbol
Moses performed all these novel things.
Blessed is the Child in whom
all hidden symbols have received their explanation.

4. The rock was betrothed by Moses:
with his staff he held out a ring for it.
It was Gabriel who betrothed the Daughter
of the Hebrews,
extending to her the luminous salutation, Lk. 1:18
marking her with the Father's love.
She is a wonder full of astonishment:
the chief of the angels was her betrother,
but it was the Lord of the angels who shone
forth from her;
she became mother to the Father's Child,
carrying Him who carries all creation.
She became a palace for the Lord of all sovereigns.
The door was not opened, yet He entered
and resided within her. Ez. 44:2
Blessed is He who in wonder shone forth
from her womb!

5. Aaron's staff which sprouted Num. 17:8–9
resembled you, O daughter of the Hebrews.
Amid all the dry staffs it alone grew moist and fair,
like you who are filled with all beauties.
Among young maidens you are outshining,
among virgins your case is unique:
the single staff within the whole world,
without any other resembling it,

the single virgin who gave birth in wondrous fashion,
uniquely, without having any comparison.
This symbol–the staff which sprouted forth in the Ark–
has now received explanation.
Blessed is He whose telling lies hidden in Scripture!

31–39

(Simeon the Potter)

The next nine short hymns are all by a village potter from north Syria, named Simeon, whose poetic talents were discovered by Jacob of Serugh. Simeon must have flourished c.AD 500. His poems exhibit a delightful simplicity and freshness; all deal with the Annunciation or Infancy narratives of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

31

(Simeon the Potter, no.1)

1. Gabriel flew down from on high on the wings of the wind,
taking with him a missive from his Lord
to bring a greeting to Mary;
this he opened and read, declaring to her
"The Lord is with you, and from you He shall shine forth. Lk. 1:28
I left Him above, on His throne,
only to find Him here, with you!"
Blessed is He in whose presence the angels give praise
in both heights and the depths.

2. "Peace be to those afar off, peace to those close at hand",
cried the prophet in the Holy Spirit; Is. 57:19
"Peace to the entire family of Adam".
This peace is God
who has come to us Incarnate.
Praise be to Him who, on our behalf,
made His greatness so low
that He became one of us, resembling us,
without leaving His Father's side.

3. Give peace, Lord, to Your Church in every quarter of the world,
remove from her all discord,
all divisions and evil disputes;
gather all her children into her bosom
in the true faith:
establish in her shepherds
who will shepherd her in accordance with Your desires,
so that she may rejoice with You in the Kingdom
at the right hand of Him who sent You.

32

(Simeon the Potter, no.2)

1. The greeting of the Father from on high
was sent by way of Gabriel
to Mary the blessed.
His spiritual mouth was filled with the salutation
that he gave her, saying
"From you the Saviour shall shine forth". Lk. 1:31

2. Mary beheld the angel
like powerful lightning,
but his words to her were gentle:
"Peace be to you, Mary, my Lord is with you; Lk. 1:28
the Holy Spirit shall come Lk. 1:35
and the Power of the Most High shall overshadow you".

3. We worship that Power
which left the cherubim and seraphim
and all the angels that serve Him
to come down and shine forth in the created world;
He has saved us and ascended to His Father
at whose right hand He now sits.

33

(Simeon the Potter, no. 3)

1. There were two ships in Judah which carried bounty,
the blessed Elisabeth, and Mary who believed.

Elisabeth bore her load in the course of marriage, Lk.1:24
but Mary bore God from the Holy Spirit.
John prepared the way,
but Christ taught the crowds
who cry out to Him at all times
"Have mercy and pity on us".

2. "You have given me strength, my Lord, and I have borne You,
and after I had given birth to You in the cave I was unable to see you
for fiery beings surrounded the tiny crib,
above it stood the six-winged seraphs.
Please tell them to lift up their wings
so that I may enter and worship Your glory,
and give You a virgin's milk
which flows at Your desire".

3. "Come in peace, blessed one", cried Elisabeth, Lk. 1:40-41
when Mary came to her as she carried in her womb
God the Word who had clothed Himself in flesh from her,
and who was born, out of union, from an untouched womb;
"Come in peace, O chariot of flesh
that carries Him who carries all and may mercy and pity be upon us".

31

(Simeon the Potter, no. 4)

1. The message which Gabriel brought
sowed peace in the created world,
peace above and peace below.
By its means salvation shone forth for the chosen people,
by its means the gentiles turned back from error,
by its means was God reconciled.

2. Blessed is Your birth, our Saviour,
Lord of all creation.

The Cherubim bear up Your splendour,
the seraphim cry 'holy' in response to Your glory, Is. 6:3
both celestial and terrestrial beings
cry out to You 'Holy, Holy'.

3. In March did Gabriel bring his message,
in December we beheld Your birth,
O blessed Child of Mary,
cherished Fruit from on high
of which mortals have eaten,
and from then on live for ever.

35

(Simeon the Potter, no. 5)

1. Gabriel the archangel
flew forth and descended from on high;
he came to the blessed Mary,
the pure Virgin without stain;
he opened his mouth and gave her greeting,
"Peace be to you, blessed among women, Lk. 1:28
my Lord is with you, and from you He shall
shine forth;
He who is the Power which cannot be described
by any being, in heaven or on earth".

2. Our Lord's Annunciation was proclaimed
from Bethlehem to Persia;
it summoned the Magi, it marked out their road
before them; Mt. 2:1–2
they carried gifts in their hands Mt. 2:11
and praise on their tongues,
they entered the cave and worshipped
Him who created Adam with His own hands,
– who became a small child of His own will.

3. Praise to the Child who was born
of Mary the blessed one,
who, of His own will, sucked her milk
– He who gives milk to babes.
Praise to Him who thus abased Himself
so that He might raise up from the dust

the 'image' of His own greatness, Gen. 1:27
ascending with it to heaven,
to the bridal chamber of light in His Kingdom.

36

(Simeon the Potter, no. 6)

1. Blessed is the prophet Isaiah
who proclaimed and spoke of Your birth*
"Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a
blessed child Is. 7:14
who shall cause all creation to return
from error to reverence of God".

2. The shepherds saw of a sudden
the luminous star which shone out for them, Lk. 2:9
and angels were telling them "Be not afraid, Lk. 2:10–11
for God is come to be born,
to deliver Adam and all his children".

3. In joy the shepherds abandoned their flocks Lk. 2:15–16
and came to worship Him
who is the new Shepherd who came down from
His Father
and found the lost sheep, Mt. 18:12
carrying it home joyfully on His shoulders.

37

(Simeon the Potter, no. 7)

1. It was from the east of Paradise
that the Magi came, bringing their offerings; Mt. 2:11
they entered to present them to the Son,
but were unable to, because of His radiance.
His mother came close and spoke with Him,
"My Son, gather in the power of Your radiance,
let the Magi enter and offer You their gifts".

2. The angels on high sang
of glory, peace and hope at Your birth; Lk. 2:14
for our sakes did You lower Yourself
to save our mortal race,

and You, Lord, were born a man
from the womb of the Virgin
- perfect in Your Godhead,
and yet wholly incarnate.

3. To You the world shall kneel down and worship,
every tongue shall praise Your name, O Lord:
Your greatness was willing to be born
amid poverty in a cave;
shepherds worshipped You, Lord,
they cried out and sang 'Hosanna',
for the Lamb of God
has shone forth to deliver creation.

38

(Simeon the Potter, no. 8)

1. In the morning the Magi asked
at Herod's palace
"Where is the King who has been born? Mt. 2:2
We will go and see Him, and revere Him,
offering to Him
the mysteries of the faithful Church,
halleluiah, halleluiah".

2. David, the king and prophet,
said in his song.
"The Lord said to me, You are my son, Ps. 2:7
and this day have I begotten You,
– a light for the gentiles Lk. 2:32
who have confessed Your Trinity
halleluiah, halleluiah".

3. A luminous star has shone out for us,
the Magi have come
to honour Him with their gifts; Mt. 2:11
they have opened and offered their treasures
to the Bridegroom of heaven
who made His Epiphany shine forth in Bethlehem,
halleluiah, halleluiah.

39

(Simeon the Potter, no. 9)

1. The virgin Earth gave birth — Gen. 2:7
to Adam, lord of Eden,
but today a Virgin has given birth
to Adam, the Lord of Heaven,
halleluiah, halleluiah.

2. Blessed are You who gave joy to creation
through this the day of Your birth;
to You be praise, O Child of the Father,
for Your birth is of Mary,
halleluiah, halleluiah.

3. Blessed is He who came down from on high
and dwelt in a woman's womb,
who was born like a man,
but not – as it is written – as a result of
carnal union, — Mt. 1:8
halleluiah, halleluiah.

4. Blessed is the Child through whom
heavenly and earthly beings are reconciled;
blessed is the King, Christ, who came
to be born for the sake of our race,
halleluiah, halleluiah.

40

(The Lament of Mary at the Cross)

When writing on the Virgin Mary the Syriac poets for the most part focused their attention on the Annunciation and the Nativity. Although Greek and Latin tradition have a number of fine poems on the Virgin standing at the foot of the Cross, the following would appear to be the only instance of a Syriac poem on the subject; it takes the form of a lament put in the mouth of the Virgin at the death of her Son on the Cross.

Mary drew close to Jesus and leaned her head
on the Cross; — cp.Jn.19:25
she began to utter cries in Hebrew, laments,
with words of suffering:

"would that I were an eagle, my Son,
that I might fly to the four quarters of the earth

5. to invite and bring in all the nations
to the great wedding feast of your death.
Who is it who has been moved by envy
against you, my Sweet One?
What has the harlot seen against you,
in return for your bringing her out of Egypt,

10. making her cross the sea through your might, cpEx.14:22
in return for the healing of her sick ones,
the full restoration of her infirm?
This is what she, all crazed, has rewarded you,
shame, abuse and the cross.

15 In return for the gall, the cross will scatter cpMt.27:34
her children to the four corners;
the city in whose bounds they seized you
shall be her fall, for your cross shall uproot
its foundations,
dispersing her to the four quarters.

20. Your tomb is like a marriage chamber
and in it you, my Son, are like the Bridegroom;
the dead resemble the wedding guests
who are served in the presence of angels.
Weep, all created things

25. at your Lord who hangs on the wood.
O sun, draw in your rays
so that the shame of your Lord may be hidden;
descend and shine out in the darkness
where your Creator has shone forth,

30. that the dead of Sheol may see
and say 'He is the Lifegiver'.
At the tribunal where they judged you
may no judge sit again;
in the holy temple where they condemned you,

35. may there be no propitiation.
The hands that laid on you the crown of thorns

– may they not be stretched out to receive
your gift.
The mouth that spat upon your face,
– may it not be filled with your good things.

40. Tremble, O earth, quake in fear,
for the Son of your Lord is abused upon you:
open your mouth and avenge his shame,
punishing the wicked children of Sion.
Where is your sword, Michael,

45. which devastated peoples and nations?
Where is your zeal, Gabriel,
mighty with your flame?
Your Lord lies stripped on the cross,
why are your courses silent?

50. O temple, show your grief to Sion
who is desolate from henceforth.
The Holy Spirit has left you
and torn the veil of your door. Mt.27:51
Go forth, O dead, to meet my only-begotten,

55. for it is he who gives life to your bodies.
Praise to you. Creator of all nature,
whom silent nature praises.
To you be praise, O Lord of the height
who was willing that mortals on earth
should condemn you.

60. Praise to you, whom the wood bore,
you who bear both heights and depths.
Praise to you whom the grave holds,
you who hold the ends of the earth.
Let the dead in Sheol praise you,

65. for amongst them has your light shone out.
To you be praise, and to the Father who sent you,
and worship to your Holy Spirit.

II. DIALOGUE POEMS

41

(Dialogue between Mary and the Angel)

In Syriac tradition Mary is never a passive figure, let alone credulous, as Eve had been when she accepted without question the serpent's suggestion. Thus, as in the Gospel text itself (Luke 1:34) Mary is often portrayed as questioning the angel closely, in order to make sure that he was not a messenger of Satan, disguised as an angel of light (cp 2 Cor. 11:14). In the following dialogue poem we are given an insight into what sort of thoughts might have been revolving in Mary's mind when she first heard the utterly astounding message that had been conveyed to her. As elsewhere in the texts translated here, we learn that Mary is finally convinced of the genuineness of Gabriel's message only when he makes mention of the Holy Spirit. This is significant, for it draws attention to the important understanding that the human response to the divine initiative always needs to be one of openness to, and cooperation with, the Holy Spirit. In this respect Mary serves as a model for all Christians.

The Soghitha belongs liturgically to the Sunday of the Annunciation, which in Syriac tradition corresponds to Advent II In the Western Calendar.

1. O Power of the Father who came down and dwelt,
   compelled by His love, in a virgin womb,
   grant me utterance that I may speak
   of this great deed of yours which cannot be grasped.

2. O Son of the Bounteous One, whose love so willed
   that He reside in a poor girl's womb,
   grant me utterance and words
   that in due wonder I may speak of You.

3. To speak of You mouth is too small,
   to describe You the tongue is quite inadequate;

voice and words are too feeble
to relate Your beauty, so please bid me tell of You.

4. Grant that I may approach, O Lord of all,
in awe to that exalted place
of the chief of the angels when he announced
to the young mother Your coming.

5. You who are discerning, come, listen and give ear
to this episode so entirely filled with wonder.
Sing glory to Him who bent down
to give life to Adam who had sinned and so died.

6. The Father in His mercy beckoned to His Son
to go down and deliver what He had fashioned,
and to Gabriel the angel he gave instructions
to prepare the path before His descent.

7. With David's daughter did Mercy shine out,
for she was to be mother of Him
who had given birth to Adam and to the world,
and whose name is older than the sun.

8. That Will which cannot be reached flew down
to summon the angel, sending him out
from the angelic hosts on his mission to her
to bring the glad tidings to a virgin pure.

9. A letter did he bring, that had been sealed
with the mystery that was hidden from all ages;
he filled it with greeting to the young girl
and fair hope for all the worlds.

10. Down flew the fiery one until he reached
the destitute girl, to fill her with wealth;
a greeting did he give her, announcing to her too
concerning her conception, the cause of wonder to all.

11. ANGEL To the Virgin did the angel thus say:
Peace be with you, O mother of my Lord, Lk. 1:28
blessed are you, child,
and blessed the Fruit that is within you. Lk. 1:42

12. MARY Says Mary: Who are you, sir?
And what is this that you utter?
What you are saying is remote from me,
and what it means I have no idea.

13. ANGEL O blessed of women, in you has it pleased
the Most High to dwell; have no fear,
for in you has Grace bent down
to pour mercy upon the world.

14. MARY I beg you, sir, do not upset me:
you are clothed with coals of fire,
mind you do not burn me.
What you have said is alien to me,
I am quite unable to grasp what it means.

15. ANGEL The Father has revealed to me,
as I do so now to you,
this mystery which is shared
between Him and His Son,
when He sent me to say
that from you will He shine out over
the worlds.

16. MARY You are made of flame, do not frighten me;
you are wrapped in coals of fire,
do not terrify me.
O fiery one, how should I believe you,
when all that you have spoken
to me is totally new?

17. ANGEL It would be amazing in you if you
were to answer back,
annulling the message which I have
brought to you
concerning the conception of the Most High,
whose will it is to dwell in your womb.

18. MARY I am afraid, sir, to accept you,
for when Eve my mother accepted
the serpent who spoke as a friend,
she was snatched away from her former glory,

19. ANGEL My daughter, he certainly did use deception
on your mother Eve when he gave her the message,
but I just as certainly am not deceiving you,
seeing that it is the True One by whom I have
been sent.

20. MARY All this that you say
is most difficult, so do not find fault with me,
for it is not from a virgin that a son will appear,
nor from that fruit, a divine being !

21. ANGEL The Father gave me this meeting with you here
to bring you greeting and announce to you
that from your womb His Son will shine forth.
Do not answer back disputing this.

22. MARY This meeting with you and your presence here is
all very fine,
if only the natural order did not stir me
to have doubts at your arrival
about how there can be fruit in a virgin.

23. ANGEL The angelic hosts quake at His word:
the moment He has commanded,
they do not answer back;
how is it then that you are not afraid
to query the thing which the Father has willed ?

24. MARY I too quake, sir, and am terrified,
yet though I fear I find it hard to believe
since nature itself can well convince me
that virgins do not ever give birth.

25. ANGEL It is the Father's love which has so willed
that in your virginity you should give birth
to the Son.
It is appropriate you should keep silence, and
have faith too,
for the will of the Father cannot be gainsaid.

26. MARY Your appearance is venerable, your message
full of awe,
your flames are leaping up.

Into the person of your Lord one cannot inquire,
and that I should believe all this is difficult to me.

27. ANGEL It is glad tidings that I have brought you:
you shall give birth to your Lord, as I have explained.
O child, give thanks to Him who has held you worthy
to be His mother, while having Him as your son.

28. MARY I am but a girl and cannot
receive a man of fire.
The matter you speak of is hidden from me,
yet you proclaim that I should accept it.

29. ANGEL Today for Adam hope has arrived,
for in you is the Lord of all pleased
to come down and release him, granting him liberty.
Accept my words, at the same time give thanks.

30. MARY Today I wonder and am amazed
at all these things of which you have spoken to me,
Yet I am afraid, sir, to accept you,
in case there be some deceit in what you say.

31. ANGEL When I was sent to announce to you
I heard His greeting and brought it to you.
My Lord is true, for so He has willed
to shine forth from you over the worlds.

32. MARY All your words quite astonish me,
I beg you, sir, do not blame me,
for a son in a virgin is not to be seen,
and no one has ever slept with me.

33. ANGEL He will come to you, have no fear;
He will reside in your womb, do not ask how.
O woman full of blessings, sing praise
to Him who is pleased to be seen in you.

34. MARY Sir, no man has ever known me,
nor any ever slept with me.
How can this be, what you have said,
for without such union there will not be a son.

35. ANGEL From the Father was I sent
to bring you this message, that His love has compelled Him
so that in your womb His Son should reside,
and over you shall reside the Holy Spirit. Lk. 1:35

36. MARY In that case, O angel, I will not answer back:
if the Holy Spirit shall come to me,
I am his maidservant, and He has authority; Lk. 1: 38
let it be to me, sir, in accordance with your word.

37. ANGEL Let your head be raised up, O maiden,
let your heart rejoice, O virgin:
O second heaven, let the earth
rejoice at you, for in your Son does it gain peace.

38. MARY Let my head be raised up, sir, as you have said.
As I rejoice, I shall confess His name,
for if you, His servant, are so fair,
what might He be like? Tell, if you know.

39. ANGEL This is something the angelic hosts are unable to do,
to gaze on Him, for He is most fearful.
Hidden is He within His Father's flame,
and the heavenly bands hold Him in awe.

40. MARY You greatly disturb me now,
for if, as you say, He is all flame,
how will my womb not be harmed
at the Fire residing there?

41. ANGEL Your womb will be filled with sanctity,
sealed with the Hidden Divinity:
a place that is holy is greatly beloved
by God as a place where to appear.

42. MARY O angel, reveal to me why it has pleased
your Lord to reside in a poor girl like me:
the world is full of kings' daughters,
so why does He want me who am quite destitute?

43. ANGEL It would have been easy for Him to dwell
in a rich girl,
but it is with your poverty that He has
fallen in love,
so that He may become one with the poor,
and enrich them when He is revealed.

44. MARY Explain to me, sir, if you know this,
when does He wish to come to me,
and will He appear to me like fire
when He resides in me, as you have said?

45. ANGEL He has already so willed it, He is come
and already resides in you:
it was so as not to frighten you that you
remained unaware.
I dare not look upon you now
that you are filled with the Fire that
dose not consume.

46. MARY I should like, sir, to put this question to you:
explain to me the ways of my Son
who resides in me without my being aware;
what should I do for Him so that He is
not held in contempt?

47. ANGEL Cry out, Holy, Holy, Holy, cp Is. 6:3
just as our heavenly legions do, adding
nothing else,
for we have nothing besides this 'Holy';
this is all we utter concerning your Son.

48. MARY Holy and glorious and blessed is His name,
for He has looked upon His handmaid's
low estate; Lk. 1:48
henceforth all generations in the world
shall proclaim me blessed.

49. ANGEL Height and depth shall sing out to Him,
angels and human kind shall give Him praise,
for He, the Lord of all, has come down
and dwelt in a virgin to make all things new.

50. MARY Great is His mercy and not to be measured,
far beyond what lips can describe;
on high the heavens cannot contain Him,
yet down below for Him a womb suffices!

51. Let heaven and earth call Him blessed;
let both angel and virgin,
and all humanity, too call Him holy,
for in His love He has descended and
become a Human Being.

52. Let heaven and angels give thanks on high,
let earth rejoice in the Virgin;
let both sides, as they exult,
give praise to the Son of their Lord

53. Let both sides be mingled in praise,
both angels and humanity,
to the Son who has restored peace between them,
when between them there had been anger and disruption.

54. Thanks be to You, Lord, from all the fiery
and invisible worlds,
in this world, too, from every mouth
let the earth sing praises to You.

12

(Dialogue between Joseph and Mary)

In this lively dialogue between Joseph and Mary the poet uses his imagination to explore what sort of feelings Joseph must have had when he came back to find his fiancee pregnant by (as he naturally supposes) another man. Mary's explanation seems to him utterly incredible and to fly in the face of all rationality. It is only near the end of the dialogue, that Mary's persistence leads Joseph in the end to half admit that there might possibly be some truth in what she was saying – hard though that would be to believe; once he has reached this inkling of faith, verification then comes, in the form of the angel's reassurance to him in a dream (Mathew 1:20-21).

Besides providing an argument between two different

positions, one of reason and the other of faith, the poet brings out very well the agony that this initial misunderstanding must have caused both Mary and Joseph.

The soghitha was used in the past for the Sunday of the Revelation to Joseph (corresponding to Advent V in the Western Calendar).

1. Our Lord performed a wonder, my brethren,
   when He came down and resided in a Virgin–
   betrothed, chaste and excellent:
   her womb was sealed and her conception glorious.

Response: Praise to You, Lord, for at Your coming
sinners turned from their wickedness
and entered into the protection of Eden's Garden,
which is the holy Church.

2. An angel brought to greeting of peace and gave it — Lk. 1:28
   to the daughter of poor parents, filling her with wealth;
   she received a conception that astonishes everyone,
   treating it in wonder.

3. In her womb was the child who fashions all,
   in her breasts was the milk which astonishes all.
   Her virginity was sealed, yet her womb was full,
   she was pregnant with child, but the secret was hidden. — Mt. 1:18

4. Joseph was dumbfounded at Mary,
   seeing her pregnancy of which he knew nothing.
   He began to chide and reproach her,
   saying, "Listen, young girl;

5. JOSEPH Reveal to me the secret of what has happened to you;
   it is most shocking, what you speak of:
   who led you astray, virgin,
   and snatched your wealth, chaste girl?"

6. MARY I will reveal to you how it happened,
   says Mary, So listen, Joseph.
   A man of fire came down to me,
   he gave me a greeting – and this took place.

7. JOSEPH That I should believe this is hard:
it is not nice, so do not repeat it.
If you are willing, speak to me
about what took place: who led you astray?

8. MARY How to tell you any more I do not know,
for I have told you how it actually happened:
the chief of angels came down and announced it to me;
I became pregnant without being aware of it.

9. JOSEPH These words are inappropriate,
Mary, for a virgin; keep silent,
for falsehood will not stand up.
Speak the truth, if you are willing.

10. MARY I repeat the very same words –
I have no others to say.
I remain sealed, as the seals of my virginity,
which have not been loosed, will testify.

11. JOSEPH You should not contradict,
but confess that you have been seduced.
Now you have fallen into two wrongs:
after getting pregnant, now you tell lies.

12. MARY You should believe my words,
for you have never seen any falsehood in me:
my chaste and truthful life bear me witness
that I am a virgin and have not lied.

13. JOSEPH I am astonished at what you say:
how can I listen to your words?
Virgins do not get pregnant
unless they have intercourse or get married.

14. MARY I am astonished that you will not believe,
for it is very easy for the Lord of all
to give fruit to a virgin –
as happened with the lamb from the branch.
Gen. 22:13

15. JOSEPH Eve was married to Adam,
and from him she had many children,
whereas you alone brazenly assert
that your womb is full without any man being involved.

16. MARY Eve is actually a witness to my words,
for she came into being without any intercourse, Gen. 2:21–22
issuing from Adam who produced her as fruit.
Why do you not believe me?

17. JOSEPH You have gone astray like water, chaste girl
just take the Scriptures and read
how virgins do not conceive
without intercourse, as you are claiming.

18. MARY You have gone astray, Joseph; take and read for yourself
in Isaiah it is written all about me,
how a virgin shall bear fruit;
if that is not true, do not accept my word.

19. JOSEPH It would befit you to be ashamed
of the affair which is open to all;
but now, after getting pregnant, you tell falsehoods'
saying you are a virgin, to use your own words.

20. MARY It would befit you, if only you were willing,
to believe my words, for I am not telling lies.
I remain sealed, as silent nature
which has no voice testifies.

21. JOSEPH Now you are glorying in falsehood
which will not stand up, young girl.
It is not possible in one and the same body
for the seals of virginity to remain after conception.

22. MARY Now you are causing me pain, Joseph,
for I am pure, and there are witnesses:

summon the local midwives
and see how my seals of virginity have not been lost.

23. JOSEPH Do you know of anyone else like you,
who resembles you, according to what you claim?
To you alone has this happened–
because it simply is not true.

24. MARY I do not have to be like anyone else,
for my Son has no fellow companion:
He is unique, and it is not possible
for another conception like mine to take place.

25. JOSEPH So then something quite new in the world
has started with you, or so you claim?
You have no proof at all,
and there is no explanation to what you say.

26. MARY I have no fear of any 'explanation':
you have one to see, if only you would look.
Who caused the stone on Horeb to flow with water, Ex.17:6
or who made that staff sprout forth fruit? Num.17:8

27. JOSEPH Let your mouth be silent, for your womb is full:
it stands as your accuser, yet you have no fear!
The very facts testify against you,
and you will not even keep silent.

28. MARY Let your mouth be silent and not pour blame on me,
for I am not to be blamed in the eyes of anyone else:
I am betrothed to you, as you are well aware.
Do not let your idea of the truth accuse me.

29. JOSEPH It is very hard for me to believe you,
that you have not exchanged me
for another, as you are saying,
for I know that I have no part in your conception;
so it is quite apparent that you are telling lies.

30. MARY It is very easy for you to believe me:
my Son has one of the angels
of fire and spirit who will testify in a revelation
whether or not I am false.

31. JOSEPH Actions cannot be done away with by words –
and your words are opaque, while your womb is full:
the very facts testify against you:
your telling lies is quite unnecessary.

32. MARY The cause of it is too hard for you or me to grasp,
but it compels me and so I speak.
As long as my truthfulness is not impugned
I will not bow my head or feel ashamed.

33. JOSEPH There is error in your words, virgin,
so that one is afraid for you after
what you have said.
Take the bill of divorce peacefully,
and be off: Mt.1:19
you may be sure I will not reveal the secret.

34. MARY It is easy for the Child who resides in
my womb
to speak on my behalf when I am overcome;
He will reveal the mystery that has happened to me,
He will explain that I have not been false.

35. JOSEPH Listen to what I shall say to you, O wise woman:
though I believe what you say,
I do not dare to touch
your pure womb, for it is filled with fire.

36. MARY Your utterance is dear to me, Joseph.
I have no desire for intercourse:
the Child in my womb will persuade you
that I am a virgin and have not played false.

37. JOSEPH There are two possibilities, and both disturb me:
if it is true, it is most frightening for me,
but if it is untrue, that is a great grief.
How I wish I could escape from them both.

38. MARY Now I shall pour out my words
and address my Son hidden in my womb;
He will reveal to you that I shall have no
other children,
and shall not be deprived of your company.

39. JOSEPH Weighty is the matter you speak of,
and I am afraid at what you say.
All the more do I want
to run away from you, being so distraught.

40. MARY There will be a great commotion concerning me,
and foolish people will make trouble for me;
I shall be accounted an adulteress,
and if my Son does not look after me
I shall be torn to pieces.

41. Mary's Lord saw her truthfulness,
and became a witness to her in her plight:
He motioned to a ministering angel who came down
and confirmed the young woman's words.

42. Joseph slept, and the angel arrived, Mt.1:20
revealing to him how the mystery had taken place.
Joseph rose up early and knelt in worship Mt.1:24
before Mary, full of wonder, who had not lied.

43. The upright man in wonder at the young woman,
honoured the virgin greatly.
Thanks be to the Son who shone forth from her,
who delivered both worlds at His birth.

44. Thanksgiving be to the Lord of all,
said Joseph to the Virgin,
for of His will He has resided in your womb
so as to give life to all at His nativity.

45. Thanksgiving be to Him, and blessed be the name
of the Word who resided in the Virgin,
remaining nine months in her womb,
so as to save Adam. All praises be to Him!

43

(Dialogue between Mary and the Magi)

The starting point for this dialogue is the stark contrast between the destitute conditions in which Mary nursed her infant baby in Bethlehem (see Luke 2:7) and the resplendence of the Magi who unexpectedly arrive from the East and present the baby with expensive gifts (Matthew 2:11) and tell Mary of his destiny. After the narrative introduction Mary asks the Magi what is the purpose of their extraordinary action. Her son is a king, they reply – to which Mary points out that they only have to look around at the impoverished surroundings to see how unlikely this is. The Magi, however, persever, and only after she has tested their integrity at length does Mary disclose to them that she too had been told by angel that her son would be a king. She then confides with them the details of her experience.

The Soghitha belongs liturgically to the Night Office on the Feast of the Nativity.

1. At the birth of the Son, light shone out
   and darkness fled the world;
   the universe lit up in praise
   of the Father's Radiance who had illuminated it.

Response: Praise to You, at whose coming
sinners turned from their wickedness
and entered into the protection
of the Garden of Eden, which is the holy church.

2. He shone forth from the Virgin's womb
   and shadows vanished as He appeared:
   darkness and error were suffocated thereby,
   while earth's extremities were illumined in praise,

3. Among the Peoples a great commotion arose
   for light had shone out in the dark
   The Peoples lept up in joyous praise
   of Him whose birth had given them light.

4. As His light flashed forth over the East
   Persia was illumined by the star

which came down bearing her an invitation
to come to the Epiphany that gladdens all.

5. The luminary speeded on its way to shine out
amongst those in dark, summoning them
to accompany it and take pleasure
in the great Light who had come down to earth.

6. A single messenger – the star – came down cp Mt. 2:2
to announce and proclaim the glad tidings
to the people of Persia, bidding them prepare.
for the King whom they should worship had now
shone forth.

7. Glorious Athor, once it was aware,
summoned the Magi, instructing them:
Take offerings and go to honour
the great King who has shone forth in Judah.

8. The chiefs of Persia, in great delight,
carried offerings from their own land
to bring to the Virgin's Son
Geld, Myrrh and Frankincense. Mt. 2:11

9. They entered to find Him a young baby
living in a poor woman's house.
They knelt down in joyful adoration
as they offered Him their treasures.

10. MARY To what purpose are these?, Mary said,
Why, and for what reason
are you come from your own country
with your treasures to this baby?

11. MAGI Your Son is a king, the Magi replied;
He wears the crown and is Lord of all;
His rule extends over the world
and all are subject to His sway.

12. MARY When has it ever happened
that a poor girl has given birth to a king?
I am destitute and needy,
how can a king appear from me?

13. MAGI With you alone has this happened,
for in you a great king shall appear.
Through Him your poverty shall make good,
for crowns, O Mary, shall be subject to
your Son.

14. MARY I have no royal treasure house,
I have not ever met with wealth.
The house is poor and the dwelling bare;
do not, O Magi, keep on telling me
my son is a king.

15. MAGI Your son is the great treasure house
containing wealth sufficient to make all rich.
Other king's treasure stores may be
reduced to poverty,
but His will never run out or need
to be rationed.

16. MARY May be it is another king that you are
talking about,
born somewhere else: go and find out,
for this is but the child of a poor girl
who is unfitted to look on a king.

17. MAGI How could we ever loose our way
once the light was provided?
It was not darkness that bade us leave,
but we have travelled in light: your son
is the king.

18. MARY You can see the baby lying quiet
and his mother's house, destitute and bare:
there is nothing regal here,
how can a king be seen here?

19. MAGI Yes, we have seen the child lying there
quiet in gentle humility, as you say,
but we have seen too that he illumines
the stars
so that they announce Him on high.

20. MARY You should enquire of different people
to find out who is the king, and then pay
him homage.
Maybe the path's direction has changed,
and the king is some other child who has
been born.

21. MAGI My girl, you should accept this,
for we have learnt that your son is king
for sure.
He directed us on a smooth path
by means of a bright star that is not
transient.

22. MARY The body is small, he has
no royal crown or throne.
What is it you see that you offer
your treasures as though to a king?

23. MAGI He is small because He so willed it:
the child is gentle and of low estate until
He is revealed–
then will come the time when every crown
shall be bowed down in worship of Him

24. MARY My son has no army
or serried legions at his beck:
he is content with his mother's poverty.
Why should he be proclaimed king by you?

25. MAGI Your Son's army is aloft,
riding on high, all aflame,
and ever since one of them came and
called us
our whole region has been astir.

26. MARY The child is but a baby, how is it possible
he should be king over all the world?
How can a mere toddler
govern mighty men and renowned?

27. MAGI Your child is old, my young girl,
the Ancient of days, prior to all others: Dan. 7:13

Adam is younger by far than He,
and by Him is all creation governed.

28. MARY It would be best if you would explain
and throw light on all this affair.
Who revealed to you this secret concerning
my son,
that he is king in your country?

29. MAGI It would be best if you would just accept it,
for if it was not the truth we had brought,
we would never have come laden all the
way here
from the ends of the earth for the sake
of your son.

30. MARY This whole secret, and what happened to you
there in your country,
please reveal it to me, like good friends:
who summoned you to come to me here?

31. MAGI A great star appeared to us Mt. 2:2
more glorious by far than the rest.
Our land was enflamed with its light,
as it proclaimed that the King had
shone forth.

32. MARY I would not like you to tell all this
in our country lest the local kings
get to hear of it and become incensed
with the child out of envy.

33. MAGI Do not be disturbed, my young girl,
your Son can topple all crowns
and place them beneath His feet.
They cannot harm Him, even if they get envious.

34. MARY It is because of Herod that I am perturbed
lest that mad dog upset me
by unsheaving his sword
and cutting off his sweet cluster before
it is ripe.

35. MAGI Of Herod there is no need to fear:
his throne lies in your child's hands:
one nod and his crown will totter and fall;
he will be destroyed, that is the end of the
wretch!

36. MARY Jerusalem will be a torrent of blood cp Mt. 2:16
as lovely children are disfigured by him;
if the city gets to know of it, people will
make a rush for him.
Let our talk be in secret: do not cause a
disturbance.

37. MAGI All torrents and awesome gorges
will be famed by your Son.
Jerusalem's sword will be blunted,
and, unless He so wills it, your Son will
not be killed.

38. MARY Jerusalem's scribes and priests
are well instructed in matters of blood:
should they discover, they would stir up
murderous feuds
directed at me and the child. O Magi, please
do keep quiet.

39. MAGI These scribes and priests have no power
to harm your Son in their envy:
by Him is their priesthood dissolved,
their festivals annulled.

40. MARY An angel revealed to me when I conceived
the child
that my son will be a king
whose crown is exalted, never to be removed.
He intimated to me just what you did.

41. MAGI That angel then of which you speak
must be the one who summoned us, looking
like a star.
He was shown to us, that we might
announce to you
that your Son is greatly more glorious than the
stars.

42. MARY That angel who appeared to me
explained to me when he announced it
that His Kingdom would have no end, Lk. 1:33
but I kept it secret so that it might not be revealed.

43. MAGI That star, too, explained to us
how your Son would wear the crown.
Its appearance was different
for it was an angel, though it never told us.

44. MARY When the angel announced this to me
he called Him his Lord, even though He had not yet been conceived;
he proclaimed Him to me as the Son of the Most High, Lk. 1:32
but where His Father is I have no idea.

45. MAGI The star too proclaimed to us
that He who is born is the Lord of the heights:
your Son rules over the luminaries
and without His orders they do not shine.

46. MARY I will reveal before you a further secret
so that you may be reassured:
I gave birth to my Son in virgin wise;
since He is God's Son, go and proclaim Him such.

47. MAGI That star has already taught us
that He is God's Son and Lord.
Your Son is above all things,
He is Son of God, as you say.

48. MARY The heights and depths testify of Him,
along with all angels and stars,
that He is Son of God and Lord.
Bear news of Him to your country.

49. MAGI The heavenly sky, by means of one star,
put Persia into commotion, and she has believed

that your Son is the great King
to whom all nations are subject.

50. MARY Convey back peace to your lands;
may prosperity abound in your realm.
O apostles of truth, may you be believed
in every place you travel through.

51. MAGI The peace of your Son shall convey us
safe back to our country, just as we came.
When His rule takes hold of the world,
may He visit our land and sanctify it.

52. MARY May Persia rejoice at the tidings you bring,
May Athor (Assyria) exult at your arrival.
Once the Kingdom of my Son has shone out,
May He place His standard in your land.

53. Let the Church exult and sing
praise at the birth of the Most High,
for both heights and depths stand illumined
at His Epiphany.
Blessed is He at whose birth all receive joy !

14

(Dialogue between Mary and the Gardener)

Although in the Gospel of John (ch. 20) it is Mary Magdalene who encounters the risen Jesus in the Garden, an early Syriac tradition held that it was Mary his mother, and this is the case in the following dialogue poem where Jesus appears to Mary as the Gardener.

1. On Sunday, early in the morning, Jn. 20:1
along came Mary to the tomb.

2. "Who will show me", she was saying,
my Son and my Lord for whom I am seeking?"

3. As the Gardener our Lord appeared to her,
answering and speaking to her thus,

4. GARDENER "Disclose to me, my lady, what it is
that you are seeking today in
this garden?" cp Jn. 20:15

5. MARY "O Gardener, please do not refuse me,
do not drive me away from your garden.

6. "In it there is a single Fruit that is mine;
apart from it, there is nothing else that I seek."

7. GARDENER "At this season you should know
that there are not fruits to be found in any
garden;

8. "so how is it that you are telling me
that you are looking for fruit today?"

9. MARY "You should realize, O Gardener,
that the Fruit for which I am searching

10. will give me life – such is my hope–
if I should but happen to see it."

11. GARDENER "What is this fruit, young lady,
about which you utter such astonishing words?"

12. MARY "I know very well, and I am quite certain,
that the sight of it is too exalted for the eye."

13. GARDENER "How you weary me with your talk,
how you vex me with what you say!"

14. MARY "Whither have you removed Him?
Disclose this to me cp Jn. 20:15
for it is Him that I am going after – after Him.

15. GARDENER "Why, lady, do you seek
the living in Sheol the devourer? cp Lk. 24:5

16. "He concerning whom you are asking
left the tomb this very night

17. "while the guards were wielding swords,
resembling raving dogs."

18. MARY "Disclose and explain to me concerning
His resurrection,
so that I may believe in Him,

19. "for He flew down from the heights of heaven
and dwelt in a virgin womb."

20. GARDENER "Incline your ear, lady, and listen,
so that I may be the one to disclose
the matter to you

21. "His resurrection gives witness to her
who bore Him;
His mother gives witness to His resurrection.

22. "Both height and depth are my witnesses
that, transcending nature, He was
both born and has now risen."

23. She heard His voice and recognized Him,
for He repeated the words,
"Mary, Mary." cp Jn. 20:16

24. MARY "Come to me, my Lord and my Master,
for I now forget my anguish."

25. Come in Your compassion, O Son of Mary,
just as You came to Mary;

26. and with You, at Your resurrection,
let Your light shine forth
on me and on him who composed this.

III. VERSE HOMILIES

45

(Verse Homily on the Virgin Mary, I)

The following verse homily retells, and expands imaginatively on, the Gospel story of the Nativity. The poem opens with God's instructions to Gabriel, who is to go down to earth to prepare a palace for his Son, since God wishes to renew the disfigured image – here described as a coin – of Adam, the primordial representative of humanity. The angel tactfully appears to Mary as a white-haired old man, so as not to frighten her; furthermore, by mentioning that her aged relative Elizabeth is already pregnant, Gebriel leaves Mary with an opportunity to test the veracity of his words, which she does. Elizabeth's solemn address of welcome to Mary, with which text ends here, provides her with ample confirmation.

The poem has sometimes been attributed to Ephrem, but this cannot be correct.

To a region that is hidden even from the Watchers
did God summon Gabriel,

and it was something like this that was said
by the Most High to the angel of fire:

5. "My Son wishes to go down to earth,
please descend and prepare him a palace.
It is time for that coin which lies disfigured
in Sheol to be raised up,
and if my Son does not polish it clean,

10. there is no one on earth who can make it bright.
Make the path of your descent
straight to Mary, the daughter of David:
amongst all women she has been sought out
and found to be fairest of all;

15. no other women is quite so pure
or chaste as she;
that is why my beloved Son
will clothe himself in a body from her womb.
The first thing you do, give her a greeting

20. so that she is not afraid at your presence.
Say to her what I am going to tell you,
and then return and come back.
Say to her 'Peace be with you; Lk. 1:28
greetings to you, filled with grace.

25. My Lord is with you, and will shine forth from you.
In your womb the Saviour is about to reside, Lk. 1:31
and he will bring salvation to the whole of creation.
From you shall shine forth the Luminous One
who illumines all the luminaries.

30. He will deliver Adam, his image, Gen. 1:27
who transgressed his commandment.'
Do not stand up to her or argue,
for she is stronger than you in argument;
do not speak too many words to her,

35. for she is stronger than you in her replies.
In gentle and lowly form
make yourself appear to the daughter of David,
lest she be afraid of your presence
when she sees a man of fire

40. standing and speaking with her.
Do not appear to her as a young man;
appear to her as someone old,
so that she is not afraid at your presence.
Do not go and muzzle her speech

45. as you did with Zechariah. Lk. 1:20
If she starts to question you closely,
disclose to her the mystery, and then be off."
The Watcher took up that missive
filled with peace for creation;

50. he flew through the serried orders of fiery beings
without being delayed by a single one of them.

He passed through the ranks of flame,
through the bands of the Children of Light.
On his head he donned white locks

55. so that he might appear to her as someone old.
Then, as the daughter of David
was standing in prayer before God,
swiftly, all of a sudden, there stood before her
this man all of fire.

60. His lips, filled with peace, gave her greeting
and he spoke to her as follows,
"Greetings to you, filled with grace, Lk. 1:28
my Lord is with you, and shall shine
forth from you.
In your womb the Saviour is about to reside, Lk. 1:31

65. and he will bring salvation to the whole
of creation".
Mary says in reply to the angel,
"How shall this be, Lk. 1:34
seeing that no man has ever known me?"
The Watcher replied to the girl,

70. "The Holy Spirit will overshadow you Lk. 1:35
and the Power of the Most High shall reside in you:
one of the Three shall overshadow in you,
just as I have related in your presence;
from the weft of your bodily nature

75. He will weave Himself a garment and put it on".
Mary then says to the angel,
"Here am I, the handmaid of the Lord; Lk. 1:38
let it be unto me just as you have spoken.
But listen to what I shall say to you, angel",

80. says Mary to that being of fire,
"Does a field that has no seed
provide fruit for the farmer?
Will I feel Him when He comes?
Will creation quake at His advent?

85. Will fiery beings come down with Him?
Will legions of angels arrive with Him?

Unless you tell me all this
I will not accept what you have said".
The Watcher said to the girl,

90. "Listen to what I shall tell you, daughter of David.
I spoke a word of greeting at the very outset,
and you heard that greeting;
I told you of the Holy Spirit, Lk. 1:35
yet the Holy Spirit is hidden from you.

95. There is one thing that belongs to the body,
of which I can tell you today:
your relative, the barren Elizabeth, Lk. 1:36
is pregnant in old age with a son.
Go and see: if Elizabeth

100. is indeed pregnant, you too will become pregnant
with God, and from you there shall shine forth
the Saviour of all ages".
The Father's messenger departed,
and the Royal Son set off to descend,

105. making straight his course to her ear,
just as the Holy Spirit has described,
so that by the path through which Death
brought rebellion
Life might enter in for Adam.
He entered and resided in Mary's womb

110. – He for whom the heaven is too small!
He who forms babes in the womb
began to fashion Himself;
He began to fashion Himself eyes
so that He – who sees all – might see;

115. He began to fashion Himself a mouth
–so that, like us, He might speak with us.
He fashioned a heart, for understanding,
so that He might make use of thought.
Thanks be to the Lord of Life

120. who bent down His compassion to our race,
showing pity to our low and humble state,

coming down to deliver us in his mercy.
However mighty were His limbs,
Mary's womb was able to cope.

125. The blessed girl stood there,
pondering in her heart as follows,
"Could it be that I am pregnant with wind,
just as can happen with others?
Could it be that this was Satan

130. who has deceived me?
I will go up and see this very day
whether it really is that Old Age has conceived:
if it turn out that aged Elizabeth is not pregnant,
then it is Satan who has deluded me;

135. but if Old Age has indeed conceived,
then it is with God that I am pregnant".
Mary arose to go up,
bearing God himself.
The ewe stood there ready to walk,

140. carrying the lion's cub. cp Gen. 49:9
Even before Mary had drawn near
to the aged Elizabeth's door,
the infant John leapt Lk. 1:41
in the womb of the Levites' daughter:

145. he had seen his Lord at the door,
so he goaded his mother and said,
"Look, my Lord is standing at the door,
go out and greet him in peace".
Elizabeth came forth at once,

150 and beheld Mary her cousin;
she received her in trepidation,
saying as follows:
"Welcome. O Ship whose cargo is God,
welcome, O Palace whither the King has
come down to reside,

155. welcome, O Garden in which is the straight Staff,
welcome, most honoured of all women on earth,
welcome, lovely Rose, beauty of the earth,

welcome, the one invited to give milk to her Lord,
welcome, Wheat wherein is Life for the earth,

160. welcome, young girl in whom is the ancient Babe,
welcome, the Dove which bears Christ the Eagle,
welcome, most chaste of women, who bears her Lord,
welcome, Haven in which the world finds rest,
welcome, Joseph's Betrothed, in whom the King resides,

165. welcome, the Ewe which gave birth to the Lion's Whelp, cp Gen. 49:9
welcome, the Vine on which is the Grapecluster of fire, cp Is. 65:8
welcome, the Vessel wherein is kneaded the Leaven of life,
welcome, fair Lady who gave birth to the Fruit of the Father,
welcome, the Embroidery on whom a novel Babe is portrayed,

170. welcome, the Lock wherein is the Key of fire,
welcome, High Hill, more exalted than all the heights,
welcome, Second Heaven, who has appeared to us,
welcome, O Wondrous One who has given birth to Emmanuel".

16

(Verse Homily on the Virgin Mary, 2)

The next verse homily could be described as a meditation on the paradoxes surrounding the Nativity. In lines 22-23 the reference is to Elizabeth and John the Baptist (the term 'virgin' can refer also to males in Syriac).

It is a source of great amazement, my beloved,
that someone should enquire into the wonder
of how God came down
and made his dwelling in a womb,

5. and how that Being
put on the body of Man,
spending nine months in a womb,

not shrinking from such a home;
and how a womb of flesh was able

10. to carry the Flame,
and how the Flame dwelt
in a moist womb which did not get burnt up.
Just as the bush on Horeb bore — Ex. 3:2
God in the flame,

15. so too did Mary bear
Christ in her virginity.
Perfectly God,
He entered the womb through her ear:
in all purity the God-Man

20. came forth from the womb into creation.
A virgin is pregnant with God,
and a barren woman is pregnant with a virgin, — Lk. 1:7, 24
the son of sterility leaps — Lk. 1:41
at the pregnancy of virginity.

25. A novel wonder has God
performed among the earth-born,
in that He is born without marriage,
and His herald's birth, too, is beyond nature's bounds.
He who measures the heavens with the span of His hand — Is. 40:12

30 lies in a manger, a span's breadth;
He whose cupped hands contain the sea — Is 40:12
is born in a cave;
His glory fills the heavens — Is 6:3
and the manger is filled with His splendour.

35. Moses wished to see His glory — Ex. 33:18
but was unable to see Him as he wished;
let us come and see Him today
as He lies in the manger in swaddling clothes — Lk. 2:12
Formerly there was none who dared

40. to see God and still live,
but today all who have seen Him
are saved from second death.

Moses depicted His symbols
when he saw fire in the bush, Ex. 3:2

45. the Magi fulfilled these symbols Mt. 2:11
when they saw Fire in the swaddling clothes.
A voice cried out of the bush to Moses
that he loose his sandals from his feet, Ex. 3:5
the silence of a star told the Magi Mt. 2:9

50. to come to the sacred place.
Moses was unable to see
the Godhead, as Scripture tells, Ex. 33:20
but the Magi entered and saw
the Godhead who had become Man.

55. The cave corresponds to the heavens,
and Moses to the Magi;
if the hearer asks
where the correspondence lies
between Moses, head of the prophets,

60. and the Magi, heads of Persia,
he should be persuaded by the fact
that, had not God in former time
chosen out wise and discerning men
to be His heralds,

65. He would not have accepted gifts Mt. 2:11
from hands that were not holy.
Moses depicted the symbols,
our Lord fulfilled them.
The face of Moses shone

70. when God spoke with him, Ex. 34:29
and he laid a veil over his face Ex. 34:33
for the people were unable to behold him
– just as our Lord, from the womb,
entered and put on the veil of the body.

75. He shone out and went forth, and the Magi
beheld Him and brought gifts.
Great is the amazement on this earth of ours
that the Lord of all has come down to it:
God has become Man,

80. the Ancient has become a child,
the Master has become like His servants,
the King's Son is as someone despised.
The exalted nature has become low,
mixing itself with our nature,

85. taking upon itself, for us all,
what is alien to its nature.
Who is it who will not listen to this wonder,
that God has come to be born?
Who will not be amazed when he sees

90. that the Lord of the angels has been born?
Believe and hold it true without enquiry
that this is so in truth.
Look upon Mary, my beloved,
how, when Gabriel entered to her — Lk. 1:26ff

95. and she spoke with him words of enquiry,
"How shall this thing be?", — Lk. 1:34
and the minister of the Spirit gave reply
to Mary and said,
"It is easy for God,

100. all things are simple for Him" –
she held it true when she heard, and said,
"Behold, His handmaid am I". — Lk. 1:38
Therefore He came down in a manner He knows;
He stirred and came in a way that pleased Him.

105. He entered and dwelt in her without her perceiving;
she received Him, suffering nothing.
He was in her womb as an infant,
yet the whole world was full of Him.
Of His love He came down to renew

110. the image of Adam that had grown old. — cp. 1 Cor. 15:49
Therefore, when you hear of the birth
of God, remain in silence;
let the word of Gabriel
be depicted in your mind,

115. for there is nothing that is hard
for that glorious Majesty
which, for our sakes, leaned down
and for our sakes was revealed,
for It bent down toward us,

120. and among us was born, from one of us.
This day mary has become for us
the heaven that bears God,
for in her the exalted Godhead
has descended and dwelt;

125. in her It has grown small, to make us great,
– but Its nature does not diminish;
in her It has woven us a garment
that shall be for our salvation. cp. Is. 61:10
In her the words of the prophets

130. and the just are all contained;
from her the Luminous One has shone forth
and dispelled the darkness of paganism.
The titles of Mary are many
and it is right that I should use them:

135. she is the palace where dwells cp. Prov. 9:1
the mighty King of kings;
not as He entered her did He leave her,
for from her He put on a body and came forth.
Again, she is the new heaven, cp. Is. 5:167

140. in which there dwells the King of kings;
He shone out in her and came forth into creation,
formed and clothed in her features.
She is stem of the Cluster of grapes; cp Is:9:1; 65:8
she gave forth fruit beyond nature's means,

145. and He, though His nature bore no resemblence
to her,
put on her hue and came forth from her.
She is the fountain, whence flowed cp Joel 3:18
living water for the thirsty, cp Jn 7:37
and those who have tasted its draught

150. give forth fruit a hundred-fold. Lk. 8:8
Therefore this day resembles
the first day of creation:
on that day created things were established,
on this, the earth is renewed,

155. and because of Adam it is blessed
– having been cursed because of him. Gen. 4:17
Eve and Adam through sin
introduced death into the created world; cp Rom. 5:12
creation's Lord gave us, by His Only-Begotten

160. through Mary, new life again.
By means of the serpent the Evil One
poured out his poison into the ear of Eve;
the Good One brought down His mercy
and entered through Mary's ear:

165. through the gate by which death entered,
Life also entered, putting death to death.
The wings of the cherubim carry Him cp Ezek. 1
whom the arms of Mary carried;
the God whom nothing can contain

170. did Mary contain and carry.
The King before whom the angels
of fire and spirit tremble
lies in the bosom of a girl,
and she cuddles Him as a baby.

175. The heaven is the throne for His glory, Is. 66:1
yet He sits on Mary's knees;
the earth too is His footstool, Is. 66:1
yet as a baby He crawls beside her.
In the palm of His hand He measures not
the dust, Is. 40:12

180. yet on that dust He walks as a child.
Happy is Adam at His birth,
for He has recovered the glory that Adam lost.
Who has ever seen
clay serve as the potter's covering? cp Is. 64:8

185. Who has ever seen fire
wrap itself in swaddling bands?
Such is the extent to which
God has lowered Himself, for Adam's sake.
To such an extent did God humble Himself

190. for the sake of His servant
who had exalted himself and transgressed the commandment
at the advice of the Evil One, the murderer. Jn 8:44
The Giver of that commandment has now
humbled Himself to raise us up!

195. Praise to that Mercy on high
which has been brought down to humanity on earth,
so that the sick world might be healed
by the Physician who has shone forth in creation.

47

(Verse Homily on Mary and Joseph)

As in no. 42, the biblical starting point for this narrative poem is Matthew 1:19–21, concerning Joseph's discovery that Mary, to whom he was betrothed, was pregnant. In developing this theme, however, the poet also makes use of an elaborated narrative of this episode which is to be found in the apocryphal Gospel known as the Proto-Gospel of James, dating from the second century AD. In this work we are first told about Mary's childhood, but the Syriac poet only picks up the story with Joseph's return from work one day to discover that Mary was pregnant (chapter 13); we are then told how he upbraided her, and we are also given Mary's reply (13:1–3): both these speeches are considerably expanded in the Syriac narrative. Then, as in the Gospel narrative of St Matthew, the angel appears to Joseph to reassure him (Mt. 1:20-21). The Proto-Gospel of James now goes on to tell how the matter was reported to the priests, who summon Joseph and demand why he has allowed the virgin (with whom he had been entrusted earlier by the same priests) to be defiled. The priests likewise rebuke Mary, and in accordance with the law outlined in Numbers chapter 5 she is made to drink the 'water of testing' which was administered to women accused

of adultery: if guilty they would die a painful death, whereas, if innocent, they would come out of the ordeal unharmed. Having drunk the 'water of testing' Mary is sent off to the hill country for it to take effect. When, however, to everyone's astonishment she returns safe and sound, she is released by the priests and all rejoice.

The Syriac poet has expanded on this basic framework, producing a narrative of considerable dramatic effect. In the final section the poet introduces the theme of the aged Simeon who had been 'bound' for (as we learn here) five hundred years.

Rumour went out all over Israel
that Mary the Virgin was pregnant with child.
Joseph heard and horror seized him,
he was sunken in great grief.

5. He left his work in the village
and directed his steps straight into his house.
As he went through the streets
he saw them all laughing at him:
he bent down his head as he wept

10. and entered his home, full of grief.
The holy girl came out to meet him,
welcoming him with joy;
she darts hither and thither in front of his face
like the sun resplendent in its rays.

15. He raised his eyes and looked at Mary
as she stood there, clearly pregnant.
He had no idea what to say,
he was astonished at her, and utterly perplexed.
When Joseph was about to rebuke her

20. his tongue just stuttered in his mouth;
he gazed on her filled with beauty,
completely astonished at her pregnancy.
Mary saw her betrothed,
and was saddened for his sake.

25. She began to speak in modesty,
saying gently in response to Joseph,
"Why are you so sad?

Why is your mind upset?
Someone who comes in from the road

30. usually displays a happy countenance,
and all those who live in his house, on seeing him,
come out to meet him with joy–
and I too rejoice to see you",
says Mary to Joseph,

35. "and now I am begging you
to tell me all about your sorrow".
The chaste man began to speak
with the virgin filled with beauty.
He says to her with emotion,

40. relating to her the suffering of his heart,
"You were so beautiful in your chastity
and lovely in your purity–
all the tribes of Israel
called you blessed among themselves.

45. The priests, seeing your virgin state,
summoned me and gave me charge over your beauty,
telling me, 'Joseph, see to it
that you preserve Mary in purity.
Do not let any deceit enter your house,

50. and do not incur a curse in the House of Israel.
See to it, Joseph, that you do not incur guilt
in that sanctuary of God'.
So, do you, Mary, take in my words
and tell me about the report that you are pregnant.

55. O Mary, where are your fair looks,
where is the beauty of your chastity?
where is the light of your free choice?
O my beauteous one, who has stolen from you
and taken away the seal of your fair looks?

60. O Mary, did I not say to you,
'Guard your chastity and your true vocation,
stay in your holy way of life,
lest all who know you should jeer at you–
and call you a prostitute as well'.

65. I took off my five sons
so that they should not be a stumbling block for you.
O Mary, why have you forgotten
that conversation with the angel
who spoke with you in the sanctuary

70. 'Greetings to you, filled with grace'.
For now I have been made to-day
into an object of reproach and mockery for my friends".
Mary saw that Joseph was weeping,
and her own tears flowed down in sympathy.

75. She explained the matter to Joseph,
"As the Lord God lives
I have not acted deceitfully before your love;
no, by the God of heaven,
I have not experienced any intercourse,

80. or done anything to transgress your bidding.
I have accepted betrothal to you,
my virginity is preserved, and I have known no man.
My God bears witness in heaven:
at about the ninth hour,

85. as I was standing in prayer,
a man of fire flew down;
I was frightened by his appearance,
but he greeted me and said,
'Greetings to you, O Mary, my Lord is with you, Lk. 1:28

90. from you shall a Saviour shine forth,
a deliverer for all creation.
And the Holy Spirit shall overshadow in you'. Lk. 1:35
I said to him, 'How shall this be, Lk. 1:34
seeing that I do not know the marriage bed?'

95. He told me, 'Do not be perturbed,
O Maid filled with mercy and grace,
for the Power of the Most High shall reside in you
the Sovereign shall shine forth from your womb; Lk. 1:32-33
his kingdom shall last for ever'".

100. Joseph listened, and he was gripped by grief
at what he heard from her.
"Mary, spare your tongue,
do not blaspheme against God'
lest all the gentiles speak

105. about your blasphemy against God;
the wickedness of our own house is quite enough,
do not let us add to our blasphemy.
O Mary, who will ever believe you,
that God has resided in your womb?

110. Who will give credence to your words,
that your pregnancy is not the result of intercourse?
O Mary, what woman
has ever given birth while still a virgin?
who will ever believe this novel teaching?

115. The mind simply cannot accept it
You have not been willing to reveal this man of yours,
you have cast an insult on God.
Keep quiet with the tale you have uttered,
take this man of yours, and be off in peace".

120. The Virgin wept on seeing the weeping
of Joseph, the upright and righteous
The Virgin says to the blessed man,
"Listen to me, so that I may speak before your love.
I am preserved in my virginity

125. as on the day I left my mother's womb;
I am sealed and preserved,
my God is witness in heaven.
And if you are investigating about the pregnancy,
come, I will show you what is written, Joseph:

130. Who ever was joined with the Earth
so that it bore Adam? Gen. 2:7
who was married to the tree
that it gave birth to the Lamb, in place of Isaac? Gen. 22:13
Again, how did the Rock give birth Ex 17:6

135. to rivers of water in Ashimon? Ps. 78:16
And how did the donkey's jaw bone Judg. 15:19
cause water to flow for Samson?
O my lord Joseph, have you not heard
that the rod sprouted for Aaron? Num. 17:8–9

140. All the mysteries which were administered
depict the mystery of the Messiah".
Chaste Joseph replied and said
to her who was filled with what is holy,
"Do not repeat these things before me,

145. for their interpretation does not belong to you.
I kept you in chastity,
I gazed upon you with honour,
but I was not aware that there are people
who are laughing at your free choice.

150. What foolish deed has been at work
so that you have introduced adultery into my bed?
Alas, how much did I rejo:ce in you,
but now you have humiliated me today.
People point at me with a finger, saying,

155. 'The harlot is in this man's house'.
Alas, Mary, for the time when they say to me,
'O fool, what is it you have allowed happen?'
Alas for the time when they require you at my hands,
blaming me for your pregnancy.

160. Your testimony does not apply to yourself:
why have you repeated to me those things
that are written?
It is not instruction from the Scriptures
that your pregnant womb requires,
but rather that you should reveal the man

165. who has committed adultery with you;
and that done, be off! cp Mt.1:19
It has pleased you to debase your high estate,
farewell, then, to you and your man.
As for me, I all never associate
at your table.

170. And if God has so willed and performed
signs in former times,
such things do not apply to you;
you have no one else in the world as a precedent:
had just one woman conceived

175. without intercourse, as you say is the case with yourself,
then we might have reason to believe your claim
that women can give birth without intercourse.
The Tree does not resemble you, Gen.22:13
nor do any of the other things which you have
recounted.

180. The person who does correspond to you is
the prostitute
who is stoned once she is found out. Deut.22:21
May the Lord free me in his mercy
from the scandal your youthfulness has
brought about;
for I was not aware of your being corrupted,

185. and I had no idea of what had happened to you".
"Listen, my lord Joseph, and let me speak to you,
and do not reckon me among the prostitutes:
as the Lord God lives,
I have never experienced intercourse.

190. No, by the Lord who delivered Isaac
from the knife on the pyre; Gen. 22:10-11
no, by that Lord who delivered our people;
no, by that Power of God
which descended upon mount Sinai, cpEx.31:5

195. I assure you I have had no knowledge of a man
from the very day I was born.
No, by the Lord of Joshua, son of Nun,
who routed thousands and tens upon thousands,
I have had no experience of intercourse

200. such as is the norm with females
and with women, just as you have said.
Do not hold me to be false, Joseph, my lord;
spare my young age, do not let me die:
all that I say is true,

205. there is no falsehood in my words at all.
Look, there are wise women in our locality
who know the manner of females:
they can testify to my free state,
that I am untouched by intercourse".

210. Mary wept when she saw
how Joseph, the upright and just, wept.
The Lord heard from within her womb
the sound of her bitter weeping.
She raised her eyes on high,

215. and saw how the heaven was perturbed:
as He resided in His mother's womb
creation trembled at Him.
An angel of fire flew down,
Gabriel, the chief of the angels;

220. he left the Most High and descended,
and reassured the upright Joseph, Mt.1:20
telling him, as he gave him comfort,
the whole truth, just as it was.
Joseph arose from his sleep, Mt.1:24

225. bowed down before Mary as he gave praise
to the Lord who had composed his distracted mind,
dispelling the doubt of his thoughts.
turning his heart to the truth,
reassuring him through Gabriel.

230. Then, following all this,
the messenger from the priests arrives, saying,
"Bring Mary along to the assembly,
come and see the priests who are summoning you".
Joseph arose and took with him Mary.

235. The crowds thronged to catch sight of her;
the daughters of Israel and her companions
spat on her face in the streets;
the noble-born of her family, too,
reviled her amidst cries of lament,

240. "Alas for our fair name,
how it has perished this day!
Alas, for in you our family is put to shame
amidst the tribes of Israel.
Alas for your chastity – who has soiled it?

245. Alas for your virginity – who has destroyed it?
Alas, for how proud we were of you,
but now our heads bow at your fall.
Alas for us henceforth and for ever,
for our fair name has perished".

250. When Mary heard these words
and saw that everyone was reviling her,
she ceased gazing up to heaven,
and gazed instead towards her womb.
"My Lord, you wished it, and I have become
your mother;

255. bid that this uproar concerning me be stilled,
for the shadows of death have encircled me
at the sound of those who revile me".
When her tears reached her womb
as she wept so bitterly,

260. that Power who resided within her stirred
and commanded that her raiment become fire:
lightning struck out beneath her,
her face gleamed out just as the sun
when it shines forth in the morning.

265. The priests beheld her in amazement.
Joseph approached, with Mary beside him,
towards the priests who quaked before her.
They had wanted to speak harshly,
but their tongues were tied;

270. the sound of their words left them
at the amazement that had overtaken them.
Gently and quietly
did they speak with her, saying,
"You know, Mary, that it was as the result of vows

275. that God gave you to your mother,
and you were brought up in the Temple
like an offering without blemish.
Your mother gave instructions the day she died, saying,
'Take Mary carefully'.

280. God saw her prayer
and he hearkened to the voice of her request.
And the Levites held blessed
your chastity and virginity;
the angels of heaven cherished you

285. and a salutation of peace descended upon you.
You have eaten the bread of heaven,
you have received the company of an angel.
But now, Mary, tell us,
who has mockingly taken off your freedom?"

290. Mary wept as she heard this,
and she spoke to the priests with suffering,
"I beg of you, accept what I have to say,
and do not reckon me an adulteress.
I am a virgin, and have known no one:

295. God bears witness to this,
I am preserved and still sealed;
the seal of my youth is intact.
Examine and see that I have not been laughed at,
spare me, and accept my words.

300. I received a salutation from on high,
from the Father at the hands of a messenger;
while I was standing in prayer,
he greeted me and addressed me thus,
'My Lord is with you, from you shall He shine forth'. Lk. 1:28

305. At his utterance I was terrified,
but by his peaceful salutation he calmed me,
giving me courage as he spoke as follows,
'The Power of the Most High will overshadow you Lk. 1:35
and the Holy Spirit will reside in you;

310. and as for the Son who shall be born from you,
his kingdom shall last for ever'". Lk. 1:33
The priests and chief priests heard,
and astonishment settled upon them:
they were amazed at her beauty,

315. and her words were weighty too.
The narrative concerning her baffles the wise:
what degree of wonder can suffice for it?
Our Lord is glorious among His heavenly legions,
yet lies hidden in the womb of her who bore Him!

320. In fear they spoke with Mary
whose entire story belongs to God.
The priests replied and said
to Mary the holy Virgin,
"Of the water that God has given

325. through Moses to Israel, Num. 5:11-28
whosoever drinks of it having committed adultery
his belly will become inflated and burst; Num. 5:22
his thighs too will waste away,
and he will become an object of fear to those
who behold it.

330. If you drink of this water
and it does you no harm, then you are
innocent. cp Num. 5:28
So it is now up to you, Mary,
whether you drink it or not".
Mary says, 'I will drink it,

335. putting my confidence in God.
I stand here confidently
for I have not played the harlot or committed
adultery.
Let the water of testing be my witness
among the people of Israel;

340. through it God shall give me
victory amidst the crowds.
Through it the people will be put to shame,
those who say that Mary has played the harlot".
When she approached to drink

345. of this water of testing,
the women, her kinsfolk, shook with fright
and implored her not to drink:
"Take our gold and our jewelry,
give a bribe to the priests, and thus escape;

350. lest some from the house of Israel should say to us
'From you she received her harlotry';
lest the gentile families should mock you
and laugh once again at you.
Let our family not be humiliated because of you,

355. let our name not be reviled in you,
let it not be abased through your humiliation,
or at your life which will wear itself out in Sheol.
O Mary, take the man whom you have known,
go off in peace, and do not die".

360. To these words she paid no attention,
that pure bearer of God;
rather, she pressed forward to drink,
just as sheep do on a summer day.
She took the water of testing –

365. and all who beheld her were sorrowing.
But our Lord assisted the young girl,
giving the victory to her person.
After she had drunk the water
she went up to the mountain tops.

370. Lamentations accompanied her
as her kinsfolk wept for her,
as though for some dead person on his journey to Sheol,
one saying to another,
"Let us prepare clothes for the burial

375. of Mary whose death is at hand".
One was bringing a garment,
another prepared the perfumes;
and all the womenfolk of her family
began to weep as follows,

380. "How will it be when the beloved girl
rots away and is wrapped in a shroud?
What hands will lay hold
of the wretched girl whose flesh is consuming away?
Alas, how did her mother weep for her

385. as she left this world:
'The sorrow is not because I am dying,
for I know that all must die;
I sorrow for the sake of Mary,
whom I am abandoning in her youth.

390. But, my sisters, as you live,
take good care of her'.
Had she been living today
and seen what has befallen her daughter
great would have been her pain and lamentation,

395. and who would have been able to comfort her?"
Everyone was weeping for the girl,
but she was rejoicing along with the angels.
Evening came, and she set off to descend,
while angels escorted her and greeted her.

400. All the peoples and nations
accompanied her in honour.
The priests saw her and were amazed,
for torches of light shone forth from her
and the beauty of her face blazed out

405. like the fair-rayed sun.
All the upright went eagerly to meet her,
as though she had come back from the dead.
The priests knelt down in obeisance to her,
bowing their heads before her.

410. In amazement one spoke to the other,
"Great is this wonder
which we have seen today in the girl".
Simeon speaks before the people, saying
"Listen, as I tell you this matter–

415. what I beheld in a revelation.
When I was in the land of Babylon,

weeping because of our people
and making supplication to God
for our salvation,

420. the Lord showed me, through the Spirit, saying, cp Lk. 226
'Simeon, why are you grieved?
For death cannot touch you
until you behold the Messiah.'
And for five hundred years I have been bound,

425. awaiting this day.
Perhaps the Messiah will shine forth
for me to see, and then I will find rest in peace,
and in you, Mary, all things will find fulfilment,
for I know that your child is the Saviour.

430. Where is the wisdom of the wise,
the knowledge of the mighty?
For they are put to shame in their wisdom,
while for you there has turned out to be victory."
From all sides came acclamations

435. of people kneeling in obeisance to her;
from all sides there were cries of joy,
of exultation, and songs of praise.
All chaste women cried out,
"Welcome, O Bride of Light,

440. welcome, beloved one who have grown great.
Blessed is He who has given you victory.
Welcome, O Mary,
proceed to your dwelling where you were brought up;
call Joseph the upright, your betrothed,

445. for you are chaste in your purity,
like your holy Lord.
We beg of you, forgive us
the insults we hurled at you;
do not curse us, O daughter of David,

450. for we did wrong in ignorance.
Come in peace to Joseph,
and we will testify that you are a virgin;

you are pure, and the angels bear witness;
you are a virgin, and your womb is witness

455. that your Son will save all creation."
Joseph knelt in obeisance before her
and he sang out in acknowledgement,
"Come with me, beloved of God,
enter the abode of your betrothed.

460. Forgive me my wrong, O daughter of Light,
far be it from me that I should have doubts
over you any more.
I will proclaim without any shame
that you are a virgin, despite your conception,
and your Child will save all creation

465. from the error of idolatry."
They scattered perfumes before her feet,
and she walked on garments through the street.
The crowds thronged in her honour,
saying "Come in peace",

470. and the people, from end to end, cried out,
"Cursed is the mouth that reviles you;
accursed by the Lord of the Law
shall be all who call you an adulteress."
Parise to God in the height

475. who wished to save all creation.
Blessed is the Lord of the height,
for whom your womb became a chariot.
Praise be to Him and to the Father who sent Him,
and to the Holy Spirit halleluiah,

480. while upon us be mercy and compassion
at all times, amen and amen.



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INDEX 1 – BIBLICAL REFERENCES

(Text no. + verse/line no.; R = Response)

Gen. 1:27 – 2:3; 35:3; 45:30 160
2:7 – 3:15; 21:5; 22:14 30 43; 39:1; 47:131
2:9 – 6:11; 22:22 30
2:21–2 – 42:16
2:22 – 27:16
3:1–7 – 27:21
3:1 – 27:18
3:3 – 27:26
3:6 – 6:10
3:7 – 3:4; 6:12; 7:7,9; 22:39
3:16 – 22:11
3:18 – 22:28; 26:16
3:24 – 23:21; 27:31
4:4 – 24:9
4:5 – 24:9
8:20-21 – 24:8
14:18 – 24:9
15:12f – 24:8
22:10–11 – 47:189
22:13 – 10:7; 14:3; 24:8 10; 42:14; 47:132 178
28:12 – 24:8
38:18 – 2:14
49:9 – 14:3; 15:17; 45:140 165
Exod. 1:16 – 3:3
3:2 – 21:3; 46:13 44
3:5 – 46:48
14:22 – 40:10
17:6 – 17:3; 30:2 3; 42:26; 47:134
19:16 – 28:7
28:1 – 24:10
28:30 – 24:10
33:18 – 46:35
33:20 – 46:51–52
34:5 – 47:194
34:29 – 2:17; 46:70
34:33 – 21:3; 46:71
Lev. 14:6 – 3:17
14:7 – 3:16
23:10 – 12:7
Num. 5:11–28 – 47:324ff
5:22 – 47:327
5:28 – 47:331
17 – 42:26
17:8–9 – 10:6; 30:5; 47:139
20:11 – (see under Exod. 17:6)
Deut. 22:21 – 47:181
Judges. 15:19 – 47:136–7
2 Sam. 13:14 – 2:12
2 Kgs 2:20-22 – 10:5
5:10 – 3:17
5:14 – 3:16
Ps. 2:7 – 38:2
51:7 – 24:38
72:15 – 15:4
72:16 – 27:15
74:14 – 27:17
78:16 – 30:3; 47:135
110:3 – 24:28 30
132:6 – 20:7
Prov. 30:4 – 11:9
Cant. 4:11 – 15:13
5:5 – 15:13
6:8 – 12:3
Is. 6:3 – 15:15; 16:11; 20:1; 28:8; 34:2; 41:47; 46:33
6:6 – 24:19
6:7 – 1:5
7:14 – 11:2-5; 12:6; 21:4; 36:1; 42:18
9:6 – 10:2; 11:2; 12:1; 15:1; 16:5–6; 22:38; 23:8; 25:9
11:1 – 11:8
11:8 – 7:7; 22:3
40:12 – 46:29 179
41:18 – 30:2
53:2 – 1:4
57:19 – 31:2
61:10 – 46:127–8
64:8 – 46:184
65:8 – 6:14; 22:40; 24:39; 45:166; 46:143

65:17 – 46:139
66:1 – 46:175 177
Ez. 1 – 12:4; 14:5; 15:7; 20:1;
22:44; 24:4; 29:6; 46:167
1:1 – 9:12
3:12 – 12:5; 15:15; 16:11;
22:44; 23:18
44:2 – 9:14; 17:4; 20:5; 30:4
Joel 3:18 – 12:1; 46:147
Dan. 2:35 – 1:5
7:13 – 12:3; 15:16; 43:27
Mal. 4:2 – 11:7
Matt. 1:18 – 39:3; 42:3
1:19 – 42:33; 47:165
1:20 – 42:42; 47:221
1:24 – 42:42; 47:224
2:1 – 35:2
2:2 – 38:1; 43:6 31
2:3 – 3:2
2:9 – 46:49
2:11 – 3:2; 15:4; 20:3; 35:2;
37:1; 38:3; 43:8; 46:65 76
2:13 – 3:3
2:16 – 3:3; 43:36
2:23 – 10:8
3:16 - 4:3
4:2 – 1:5
6:22 – 5:2
11:30 - 3:9
18:12 – 15:16; 20:6; 36:3
20:16 – 2:5
27:34 – 40:10
27:51 – 40:53
27:66 – 16:6
Mark 4:27 – 12:7
Luke 1:18 – 41:11; 42:2
1:20 – 45:45
1:24 – 33:1
1:26 – 25:2; 27:7
1:28 – 3:2; 16:9; 19:1;
21:1 5; 25:6 8; 26:1;
27:8 12; 30:4; 31:1; 32:2;
35:1; 45:23–24 62;
47:89 304
1:31 – 32:1; 45:26 64
1:32 – 17:5; 43:44; 47;98
1:33 – 3:1; 43:42; 47:99 311
1:34 – 25:10; 27:13;
45:67 96; 47:93
1:35 – 22:36; 25:14; 27:7;
32:2; 41:35; 45:70 – 71 93;
47:92 97 308
1:36 45:95
1:38 – 27:19; 41:36; 45:77;
46:102
1:40 41 – 33:3
1:41 – 45:141; 46:23
1:42 – 27:12; 41:11
1:48 – 13:2; 14:6; 17:5;
23:10; 41:48
1:79 – 7:6
2:7 – 15:3; 22:39
2:9 – 36:2
2:10-11 - 36:2
2:12 – 46:38
2:14 – 15:9; 37:2
2:15–16 – 15:9; 36:3
2:20 – 15:9
2:22-24 -- 24:5
2:24 – 24:7
2:25 – 24:12
2:26 – 24:13; 47:420
2:27 – 24:25 31
2:28 – 3:2; 15:11; 24:R
2:29 – 24:11 15 23
2:32 – 20:3; 38:2
8:2 – 3:17
8:8 – 46:150
8:23–24 - 10:8
13:32 – 15:17
24:5 – 44:15
John 1:14 – 21:5
2:9 – 10:8
4:7 – 1:5
6:35 – 12:7
7:37 – 46:148
8:44 – 26:11; 46:192
8:56 – 24:10
9:6 – 3:12,15
11:43–44 – 3:15
19:25 – 40:1
20:15 – 44:4,14
20:16 – 44:23
20:19 – 21:1
Rom. 5:12 – 46:158
5:20 – 27:6
14:11 – 37:3

1 Cor. 11:3 – 2:16
15:45 – 22:13
15:49 – 46:110
Eph. 2:14 – 26:12
Phil. 2:7 – 15:12
Col. 1:20 – 12:1
2:14 – 14:4; 22:24 26; 26:3 11; 27:1 3
Protogospel of James 10:1 – 21:7
11:1 – 47:70
13–16 – 47 (passim)
19:1 – 42:22

INDEX 2 – NAMES

Aaron 30:5; 47:139
Abel 24:9
Abraham 22:41; 24:8 10
Adam 2:3; 3:12; 6:6 13; 13:8; 15:18; 21:5; 22:5 11 13 16 21 22 25 29 38 40 42 50 23:4 21 22; 24:3 23; 25:5; 26:1 2 4 16; 27:2 10 16 20-23 25 29; 31:1; 35:2; 36:2; 39:1; 41:5 7 29; 42:15 16 45; 43:27; 45:30 108; 46:110 155 157 181 182 188
Amnon 2:12
Ashimon (cp Deut. 32:10) 47:135
Athor (Assyria) 43:7 52
Babylon 20:5; 47:416
Bethlehem 15:8; 20:7; 21:7; 35:2; 38:3
Cain 24:9
Chaldeans 9:13
David 2:10 12; 9:12; 12:1; 14:2; 15:4 10 14; 20:1; 21:2; 22:40 49 51 24:28 30; 27:22; 28:1; 30:3; 38:2; 41:7; 45:12 37 56 90; 47:449
Eden 22:24 30 40; 26:4 14; 27:27 28 30; 42:R = 43:R
Egypt 3:3; 40:9
Eliezer 24:10
Elisha 3:16 17
Elisabeth 33:1 3; 45:97 99 133 142 149
Ephratha 20:7
Eve 3:4 6; 5:3–5; 6:10 13; 7:7 8 12; 9:2; 14:4; 22:3 25 26 42 45; 23:19 22; 26:9–11 14; 27:1 2 4 16 20 23 24 26 29 30; 41:18 19; 42:15 16; 46:157
Ezekiel 9:12; 12:4; 20:5; 29:6
Gabriel 3:2; 16:9; 19:4; 21:2; 22:6 7 33; 25:2 3; 26:9 11–13; 27:7 18 20 24; 29:3; 30:3 4; 31:1; 32:1; 34:1 3; 35:1; 40:46; 41:6; 45:2; 46:94 113; 47:219 229
Genesis 27:16
Golgotha 10:7
Hebrews 3:3; 11:4; 30:4 5
Herod 3:2; 15:17; 38:1; 43:34 35
Holy Spirit 2:8 15; 21:2; 22:36 51; 25:14; 31:1; 32:2; 33:1; 40:52 67; 41:35 36; 47:92 420 479
Horeb 17:3; 42:26; 46:13
Isaac 10:7; 22:3; 24:8; 47:190
Isaiah 11:2–4; 12:6; 16:4 5; 21:4; 23:8; 36:1
Israel, Israelites 17:3; 47:1 43 50 236 243 339 350
Jacob 14:3; 24:8
Jerusalem 43:36–38
Jesse 11:8; 24:30
Jews 24:18; 27:31
John the Baptist 33:1; 45:141
Jordan 3:16; 15:10
Joseph 2:14 16 17; 15:15; 19:5; 20:6; 21:7; 24:9 38; 27:31; 42 passim; 45:159; 47:3 19 26 34 47 100 121 129 138 142 186 202 211 221 234 266 444 451 456

Joshua 47:197
Judaea, Judah 3:3; 33:1
Judas (Iscariot) 24:20
Lazarus 3:15
Levites 45:142; 47:282
Magi 3:2; 35:2; 37:1; 38:1 3; 43 passim; 46:45 49 53 56 60 75
Mary passim
Melkizedek 24:9
Michael 15:7; 19:4; 40:44
Moses 2:17; 3:3; 4:6–8; 21:3; 30:3 4; 46:35 43 47 51 56 59 67 69
Nazareth 11:8; 25:1 4
Noah 24:8
Paradise 6:11; 37:1
Paul 22:13
Persia 35:2; 43:4 6 8 49 52; 46:60
Samson 47:137
Satan 3:3; 9:1–2 (Rebel); 22:3 (Snake, Dragon) 11 24 (Serpent) 25 (Dragon); 26:11 (Murderer) 12 (Accursed One); 27:2 (Dragon, Captor) 5 (Dragon) 7 (Accursed One) 21 (Liar) 24; 45:129 134; 46:161 (Evil One) 192 (Evil One, Murderer)
Sheol 22:3 16; 23:24 25; 27:20; 40:30 64; 44:15; 45:8; 47:357 372
Simeon (Lk 2) 3:2; 15:11; 24:R 11 12 19 20 36 39; 47:413
Sinai 22:4; 24:6; 28:7; 47:194
Sion 12:6; 40:43 50
Tamar (Gen) 2:14
Tamar (2 Sam) 2:12
Zechariah / Zacharias 45:45

INDEX 3 – SUBJECTS

'alien' (anti-Marcionite) 3:17
Ark 24:40; 30:5
baptism of Christ 4:3–5
baptism, Christian 2:9–10
bride 1:2–3; 27:11
bridal/wedding chamber 3:6; 17:4; 24:1; 27:22; 35:3 (of light); 40:20
Bread (eucharistic) 2:4–7; 3:6; 15:8
cave (of Nativity) 33:2; 37:3; 46:55
chariot 10:8; 12:5; 14:1,5; 15:5; 20:1; 22:44; 23:15; 24:4; 19:1, 6 7; 33:31; 47:476
cherub(im) 12:3,5; 14:5; 15:15; 16:11; 17:5; 19:4; 20:1; 23:18, 21; 27:31–2; 29:8; 32:3; 34:2; 46:167
Church 2:4; 15:13,22; 21:1; 24:19; 31:3; 38:1; 43:R 53
clothing imagery 2:11,13; 4:6,9, 11,12; 6:12; 7:9; 33:3; 45:18, 74–5; 46:6,74,127,138
coals of fire 1:14,16
cross 40
crown of thorns 40:36
darkness 4:8,10,12; 7:6,12; 14:4; 23:24–5; 24:2; 25:9; 43:1-3, 5,17; 46:132
death 7:8; 22:11,28,29; 27:25,29; 28:4,5; 46:42 (second) 158, 166; 47:256,422
December 34:3
document of debt (Col. 2:14) 14:4; 26:3; 27:1,3
eagle (see also under titles of Christ) 40:3
ear of Mary 16:6; 27:4–6; 28:2; 45:105; 46:18,164
eye of Mary 4:1-2; 5:1–7
fire 19:2; 22:4; 23:2,3,17; 25:2,10; 27 9; 41:14,16,26,28,44; 42:6, 35; 43:25; 46:46; 47:261
fire, man of 21:7; 25:7,8; 41:28; 42:6; 45:39,59; 47:86
Fragrance 2:14,15; 15:8,20,21

image 2:3-5,7; 35:3; 45:30,160; 46:110
'Just God' (anti-Marcionite) 3:18
law 24: ; 27:26; 47:472
letter, missive 25:1,3,4; 27:8; 28:1; 31:1; 41:9; 45:48
liberation, freedom 3:10; 6:5; 7:10; 41:29
manger 15:3,5,11; 20:3; 21:7; 46:30,34
March 34:3
medicine 28:6
milk, Mary's 1:4 (4:4); 6:2; 7:3; 9:4,7; 10:4; 13:3; 14:3; 15:3, 10,19,21; 16:3,7; 17:1; 19:1; 20:2; 22:27; 24:3; 30:1; 33:2; 35:3; 42:3; 45:154
palace (see also titles of Mary) 14:2; 45:6
pearl of virginity 2:12
poison, sting 6:6; 22:3; 27:5; 28:6; 46:162
reconciliation 6:7;25:3; 26:2-6; 27:10
robe, garment of glory 3:4,6; 6:12; 7:9; 23:23; 27:22;(41:18)
sea of fire 19:2
seal of virginity 9:7; 16:4,6; 17: 1; 20:7; 22:20,31,46; 30:1; 42: 10,21,22; 47:59,126,296-7
seraph(im) 15:15; 16:11; 17:5; 19: 4; 20:1; 22:4; 23:18; 24:19; 28:8; 32:3; 33:2; 34:2
serpent, snake 3:6; 6:6; 14:4; 22: 24; 23:21; 26:1,2,9,10; 27:1, 4,6,17,18,20,26,28,30; 28:2,6; 41:18; 46:161
swaddling clothes 15:3; 22:39; 24:23; 29:7
Synagogue 24:19
tomb 4:5; 16:6; 40:20
Trees of Life and Knowledge 6:10,11; 22:22,30; 27:25,28-31; 28:3,5
Watcher(s) 17:6; 18:1; 22:36; 25: 1,9,14; 26:5; 27:9,15,22; 45:1, 48, 69,89
womb, of Father 29:7
of Jordan 4:3,4
of Mary 1:7,8; 2:15; 4:5; 6:2; 8:1,3; 9:3; 14:1,2; 16:6,7; 17: 4; 18:6; 20:R 3,7; 21:5; 22:5, 9,12,20,21,31,36-7,46-9; 23: 1,2,21; 25:9,14; 27:10; 30:1,4; 33:3; 37:2; 39:3; 41:1,2,17,21, 40,41,50; 42:1,3,27,31,34-36, 38,44,45; 43:2; 45:18,31,109, 124; 46:9,12,73,107; 47:109, 163,212,216,253,258,319, 454,477.

INDEX 4 – TITLES AND TYPES OF CHRIST

Adam 22:5 (second) 13(from on high); 39:1(Lord of heaven)
Aged Child 23:24; 45:160
Ancient, Ancient of Days Dan. (7:13) 12:3; 22:47; 24:28; 27:11; 43:27
Balsam 2:14
Blessing, heavenly 14:6
Bodiless One 15:14
Bridegroom 17:4(glorious); 40:21
",heavenly 17:4; 38:3
Bright One 4:5
Cluster of grapes (Is. 65:8) 6:14; 22:40; 24:39; 45:166; 46:143
Coal of Fire (Is. 6:6) 1:5; 19:1; 23:3
Compassionate One 15:8
Creator of humanity 22:34
Creator of Light 4:R 15
Creator of all nature 40:56
Daystar (Lk 1:78) 4:5
Drink of heaven 17:3
Eagle 12:3; 45:161

Emmanuel 12:6
Establisher of all 41:7
Exalted One (Most High) 18:3; 22:45; 29:8; 41:7 13 17 53
Farmer, Husbandman 15:2; 27:15
Fashioner 15:5; 27:19
Fiery One 14:1; 29:1
Fire 9:3; 22:27 47; 23:2 3; 41:40 45; 46:10 185
Flame 9:5; 22:27; 28:8; 46:11
Food of heaven 15:8
Fountain 12:1
Fruit (Lk 1:42) 6:10; 7:11; 9:2 11; 10:6; 13:7(of life); 15:2; 16:1 8; 21:6; 22:51; 23:22 (of life); 24:37; 27:27 29 32; 28:4 6; 34:3; 45:168
Gentle One 29:3
Good One 4:14; 24:32; 46:163
Grass (Ps 72:16) 27:15
Great One 22:46
Harvest pile of corn (Job 5:26) 24:36; 27:14
He Who carries all creation 30:4
He who clothes all 1:8
He who covers all 3:4
He who created Adam 35:2
He who fashions babes 9:4; 29:5; 45:22
He who gives crowns 14:2
He who gives drink to all 1:8
He who gives life to the Watchers 19:1
He who gives milk to babes 35:3
He who supports all things 6:3
Herb, Offshoot, Root (Is. 53:2) 6:6; 23:21
Hero, Mighty One (Is. 9:6) 1:8; 6:5; 9:1; 15:31; 22:38 (+ of ages); 23:8 13; 25:6
Hidden Child 22:21
Hidden One 8.3; 19:5
Hidden Power (2:2); 6:13
High Priest 2:14; 3:5
Holy One 1:3
Hope of those below 29:5
Hunter 3:3
Juice-Blood 22:40
Key of fire 45:170
King, Sovereign 2:13; 25:6; 27:12; 43:6 7; 31:49; 45:164; 46:171; 47:98
King of kings 15:17; 46:136 140
King, great 43:7 49
Lamb 1:6; 14:3; 15:9 16 17; 17:5
Leaven of life 45:167
Life 3:3; 5:7; 7:5; 22:1; 37:3; 45:108 159
Light 4:6 15; 7:6; 13:4; 14:4; 25:6; 28:1; 43:5 (great)
Lily 2:15
Lion's whelp/cub (Gen. 49:9) 14:3; 15:17; 45:140 165
Living Water 46:148
Lord of Adam 21:5
Lord of all 19:R; 22:34; 23:26; 41:4 49; 42:14; 43:11; 46:78
Lord of all creation 30:4
Lord of the angels 17:5; 27:12; 30:4; 46:90
Lord of the height (s) 40:58; 43:15; 47:476
Lord of kings 14:1; 21:6; 30:4
Lord of the Law 47:172
Lord of life 45:119
Lord of the luminaries 20:3
Lord of majesty 9:8; 25:5
Lord of priests 24:38
Lord of spirits 24:20
Lord of supernal beings 29:5
Luminous One 45:28; 46:131
Maker of the human race 9:4
Maker of the light 4:15
Mediator 24:26 37
Medicine of life 6:13
Mighty One (see Hero)
Most High (see Exalted One)
Mountain, great (Dan 2:35) 1:5
Ocean of wisdom 22:49
Offshoot (see Herb)
Physician 46:198
Planter of the Garden 27:25
Power of the Father 41:1
Priest 6:7; 15:16
(see also High Priest)

Provisioner of all 1:8; 9:4; 13:3; 17:1; 22:27
Provisioner of all races 6:3; 23:1
Rabbuli ('my Master') 19:3
Rain of blessing 22:16
Ray 21:3; 24:2
Rich One 23:2
Riches 25:14; 26:15
River of life 22:37
Root (see Herb)
Royal Child 6:13
Royal Son 3:5; 45:104; 46:82
Sacrifice, Victim 6:7; 15:16
Salt (2 Kgs 2:20–22) 10:5
Saviour of all 30:1
Saviour of the world 21:6
Sheaf (see Wheat sheaf)
Shepherd 15:9 true) 16 17; 17:5; 36:3
Shepherd of all 1:6
Shepherd of all creation 20:6
Son of Being 15:14
Son of the Bounteous One 12:3; 41:2
Son of the Creator 2:17; 3:R 11 14 18
Son of the Holy One 2:14
Son of the King (see Royal Son)
Son of the Living One 24:17
Son of the Most High 2:11; 43:44
Son of El Shaddai 15:7
Son of the Lord of all 3:17
Son of Mary 44:25
Splendrous One 1:7
Staff 45:155 (straight)
Steersman of creation 12:1
Sun 9:3; 23:4; 24:2; 25:9
Sun of Righteousness (Mal. 4:2) 11:7
Thunder 1:6
Treasure 14:4
Treasure store of fragrance 2:15
Tree of Life 6:11; (22:30)
Wheat sheaf 7:4; 12:7; 24:36
Wine 17:2
Wonderful (Is. 9:6) 10:3; 11:2; 12:1; 15:1; 25:9

INDEX 5 – TITLES AND TYPES OF MARY

Ark 2:16;10:5
Burning Bush (Exod. 3:2) 21:3; (46:13,44)
Bearer of God 47:361
Betrothed 2:9
Bride 1:2,3; 27;11; 47:439 (of light)
Calf (reference ?) 22:41
Chariot (Ezek. 1) 29:1; 33:3
Cloud 23:4 (luminous); (28:7)
Daughter of David 9:12; 12:1; 15:10,14; 16:2,2; 20:1; 22:1,5,17,49,51; 27:22; 28:R; 30:3; 41:7; 45:12,37, 56,90; 47:449
Daughter of the Hebrews 30:4,5
Daughter of humanity/Man 4:4; 25:5; 27:11; 28:4; 29:1,4,6
Daughter of light 24:19; 47:460
Daughter of poor parents 23:2,13; 42:2
Destitute, poor 13:1; 41:10,42; 43:12
Door (Ezek. 44:2) 9:14; 20:5; (30:4)
Dove (Cant. 5:2) 12:3; 45:161
Earth (Gen. 2:7) 21:5
Field 7:4; 24:36; (27:14)
Earth, thirsty (Is. 53:2) 41:4
Eden 27:30
Embroidery 45:169
Ewe 14:3; 45:139,165
Fountain, spring (Joel 3:18) 13:4; 22:37; 46:147
Garden (Cant. 4:12) 22:16; 45:155
Grapes 17:2

Haven 45:163
Heaven (Is. 65:17) 29:4; 41:37 (second) 45:172; 46:122, 139 (new)
High Hill 45:171
Lock 45:170
Mother of God 22:20
Orient 20:3
Orphaned girl 29:4
Palace (Prov. 9:1) 3:5; 25:6; 30:4; 45:6,154; 46:135
Rock (Exod. 17:6) 17:3; (30:2)
Rose 45:157
Sanctuary 3:5
Ship 7:5; 12:1; 33:1; 45:153
Staff, Rod (Num. 17:8–9) 10:6; 30:5
Stem 46:143
Tabernacle (shekhinta) 25:5
Tablet 42:17
Temple 22:38
Tree (Gen. 22:13) 10:7; 14:3
Tree of Life 28:5
Vessel 45:167
Vine, Vine shoot 6:14; 22:40; 24:59; 45:166
Wheat 45:159

INDEX 6 – FIRST LINES

A chariot of flesh did Mary become 29
A Virgin most pure 24
At the birth of the Son, light shone out 43
At the snake's persuasion 26
Blessed are you, Mary, born in poverty 14
Blessed is the prophet Isaiah 36
Come, all you who have discernment, let us wonder 12
Come, let us call Mary 'blessed' 13
Gabriel flew down from on high on the wings of the wind 31
Gabriel the archangel 35
I shall not begrudge it, my Son 2
I was full of wonder at Mary as she gave suck 23
Illumine with your teaching 5
In Eden Eve wrote out 27
In the morning the Magi asked 38
It is a source of great amazement, my beloved 46
It was from the east of Paradise 37
Leap for joy, young girls 9
Let Mary in her purity give praise 8
Make ready, you band of virgins 11
Mary became like a letter, full of secrets 28
Mary drew close to Jesus and leaned her head on the Cross 10
No one quite knows, Lord, what to call 1
O Power of the Father who came down and dwelt 41
O Virgin full of wonder 18
On Sunday, in the morning early 44
Our Lord performed a wonder, my brethren 42
Permit me, Lord, to tell with faith Your story 15
Rumour went out all over Israel 47
Stir up your strains, my lyre 22
The blessed woman heard the salutation 21
The chariot of fire carries Him in awe 20
The Father wrote a letter 25

The greeting from the Father from on high 32
The inquisitive scribe hears of the Virgin giving birth 10
The message which Gabriel brought 34
The tiny child I carry himself carries me 3
The virgin daughter of David 16
The virgin Earth gave birth 39
The Virgin has invited me to sing in wonder of her story 6
The Watcher beheld a virgin full of wonder 19
There were two ships which carried bounty 33
Through Your gift may I sing songs of discernment 7
To a region which is hidden even from the Watchers 45
Your birth is a source of wonder, O Saviour of all 30
When it is associated with a source of light 4
Who will not wonder at Your nativity most glorious 17

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P. 1–192 (= Moran Etho V, SEERI, Kottayam, India, 1994).

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